

eartrip

Issue 5 - March 2010



Sergey Kuryokhin



Maggie Nicols

CONTENTS

Editorial

By David Grundy.

Paul Desmond (Part Three)

The tale continues, as Paul Desmond finds himself in the midst of a satanic ritual, playing bamboo flutes in a frozen wasteland, and attempting to represent complex philosophical truths. Dr Martin Luther Blisset remains your humble narrator.

An Appreciation of Sergey Kuryokhin: On the Occasion of a Reissue of Some Combinations of Fingers and Passion

“An unpredictable unfolding of contradictory states, agony, jouissance, terror, hope, dementia, insight...” By Seth Watter

Gender and Music: “In Our Different Rhythms Together”

“Maybe one day, there will no longer be the need for special features on gender; a post Patriarchal Capitalist society will experience genuine diversity & humankind's multidimensional difference will be what unifies us. Until then, I'm happy to grapple with the contradictions of gender & music in our time.” The complex relations between gender and free improvisation form a topic which always seems to receive less scrutiny than it should; hence Maggie Nicols' essay, which addresses some of the issues at stake, with particular reference to her own career at the forefront of improvised music.

You Tube Watch

Videos documenting recent live performances by the Lucio Capece/Christian Kesten duo, and the trio of Tania Chen, Shabaka Hutchings and Mark Sanders, as well as a studio session featuring the great bassist Cecil McBee, and archive footage of John Klemmer in his pre-Smooth Jazz phase.

CD Reviews

From music for contemporary jazz big band, to new releases by established masters of free jazz and improvisation, and new experimental works for voice and electronics. Artists include Wadada Leo Smith, Bill Dixon, Joel Futterman, Darcy James Argue and Gigantomachia. Plus ESP-Disk re-issues of recordings by Charles Tyler, The Revolutionary Ensemble, and Sun Ra bassist Ronnie Boykins; and a re-visited version of a 1970s solo recording by Byard Lancaster. Reviewed by David Grundy, Ian Thumwood and Sandy Kindness.

Book Reviews

Under consideration are: Martin Williams' take on Miles Davis' 'Kind of Blue'; the first ever free jazz coffee-table book; and a thought-provoking collection of essays considering the relation between noise and capitalism.

Gig Reviews

Gannets and Phil Waschmann blow away the cobwebs in Oxford; Sunn O))) threaten to undermine the building with the force of their sonic vibrations in Bristol.

EDITORIAL

It's been a while since the last issue of 'eartrip', for which there can be no real excuse; but anyway, a couple of years into the project, we're onto the fifth issue, and there's still plenty to write and think about – so hopefully issue number six might be a little less slow in rolling out. There's not really much need for me to write a big editorial: the words that follow should be able to stand up for themselves. Inside you'll find the usual batch of reviews, including a lengthy examination of the debate-sparking collection, 'Noise and Capitalism', edited by the always-provocative Mattin, as well as an essay by Maggie Nicols addressing the relations between free improvisation and gender. And not forgetting, of course, the continuing adventures of Paul Desmond. Send bile and bouquets to the address below...

David Grundy

Email dmgrundy@hotmail.co.uk if you have any comments or suggestions, or if you want to write anything for the magazine. You can also join the inevitable Facebook group...Submissions for review can be sent in digital format via email, or as physical copies to the following address:

17 Avenue Road
Old Town
Swindon
Wiltshire
SN1 4BZ
(United Kingdom)

PAUL DESMOND (Part Three)

By Dr Martin Luther Blisset



English Winter can be Real Bad

The hands of the clock run backwards. Reverse-twisted mirror above the oak beamed fireplace; A small whitewashed cottage, probably 16th century. Somewhere south of the river, South West of London. Thick fog outside.

“Welcome, Mister Brubeck – or may we call you Dave?”

“Yes, call me Dave, let’s not be formal.”

“Well okay Dave, it’s lovely to have you with us. I’m Cleo, and of course you know my husband Johnny...”

“Yes, I have long admired your work...”

Blackthorn hedges obscure the remote stable-yard. As midnight approaches hooded figures assemble in a torchlight procession. Low voices chant ancient winter rhymes; the firelight sparks and throws up long shadows against the outbuildings.

“Our number is complete, thirteen are assembled here...”

“And call me Mom, relax...and of course we call dad ‘Father Johnny’...”

Brubeck stands in the centre circle. It's freezing. This isn't California, that's for sure. And these English customs can be a little strange. Old-World ways I guess... Gosh I wish they'd give me back my clothes though...

Cleo steps into the firelight: “Human Beings, Mister Brubeck, are like dogs, are they not? Dogs that that have been trained to stand on their hind legs, to dance and wear skirts and dive through burning hoops, or chase hares for sport; to be rewarded or chastised according to their performance. We are no more emotionally equipped to deal with the lives we live than are trained poodles...”

Sinister half-tone harmonies, rough voices rising in cadence. Brubeck shivers. White skin rising in gooseflesh. Johnny Dankworth, wearing a cape which seems to be made of dried fish skins and turkey feathers, begins to swing a flaming censer in a wide arc above the heads of the cowed peasants.

“Cleo, Cleo!”

“Yes darling what is it?”

“The knife, dear, the knife.”

“Ah yes, yes of course...”

Cleo casts her robe aside, her proud breasts rising and falling in the firelight. In her right hand a silver dagger gleams, its curved blade flat against her skin.

Father Johnny places a bowl at Brubeck's feet.

If You like Music That Doesn't Go Anywhere, Then This Could Be For You...

Thatched sticks, a lattice of frozen ferns. Paul Desmond halted his

team of dogs and reached for the flask of brandy...

The stone farmhouse seemed deserted. He made his way through the knee-deep snow to the wooden door.

"Honey, I'm home.."

there was no one. the farmhouse was deserted. he sat at the wooden table in the middle of the only room and reached into his jacket pocket. no one answered him. the old farmhouse was deserted. "where's the. where's the." he reached into his inside jacket pocket, sat at the table and pulled out the kendal mint cake.

"one piece. one piece now. there are no pieces. outside outside. ok doggies. ok i'm coming. the music of the night. such sweet music. you call that music." he rested his head on the wooden table top. in the morning he was dead. there was a brubeck cd on the table in front of him. he had no idea what this object could be. it was 1963. the dogs were howling.

"howling at the grave of their master. one more piece. all is in pieces. we can look inside. i am inside. paul? paul? hello, come in. this is the way step inside. the drill is in my head. i am the drill head. i am drilling. right left right left. quickmarch. slow april. the tattoo. military. they fucked him up, the army did. at heart i am a muslim. at heart i am an american."

the snow and ice opened up in front of him. the sledge moved gliding over the flat white grey terrain.

"mush mush. the dogs. the dogs. petties. petty concerns. out in the ice. nothing is real. only the ice. there is no reality. only the ice knows this. the purity of water freezing. unconcerned. mish mash. mish mash. onward. i will play the only music. the music of bamboo. bamboo and flute. at heart i am an eskimo, an inuit person." he looked out into the wastelands of ice and snow. he raised his head and shouted. "fuck you brubeck. there is no symmetry. who gave you this number?" their last conversation coming back at him, recurring here on the ice.

"Jeez old pal come on, it's me David for chrissakes. Come on now. Come back why dontcha. We been working on some new tunes. Symmetrical scales man. Morello met this guy, Lacy, soprano player? Anyways this guys been showing Morello, the banjo player, been showing him these scales. What you do see, is you split the octave down the middle. So, take say, C ok, F sharp's the middle note. And then you put notes in around that symmetrically. C then E. F sharp and then G.'

"who gave you this number? this number is ex-directory. how did you get this number?"

"Come on pal. Hey you know what? We've done some tunes, back to the old whole tone scale. Four four time. There's only two whole tone scales. So you always know you're either in one or the other. Shit, what d'you say. Come on back Paul, we need you."

he held the receiver out and looked at it. black plastic against the white and grey landscape, the wind in his ears. his beard freezing. "no, this is plastic. there is no plastic in reality." he caught himself thinking wrong. "there is nothing. all is not. nothing is not. everything is nothing." he knew only the ice could know. he threw away the telephone. "there is no plastic in the allness." he threw his head back. was he moving? did he really just holler?

"no scales in the oneness. only the sound of the chimes. the bamboo and the flute. the ice. water. the music of night. such sweet songs. i too have. i too have loved. i too have loved. puppies. puppies. mish mash mish mash. hoykee carokee. the chimes."

he patted the tarpaulin bundle in front of him on the sledge. "the chimes. everything is in the bamboo. nothing is real. this is the way step inside. i am outside. outside of society, of reality. are we moving. the mint cake. the mint cake."

hours later he came to. the sledge was still. "the wind, the wind is howling, through the graves the wind it howled. puppies. i will have to eat the dogs. godawful. dogs shaped like a sausage hot doggedy dawg. ketchup. gotta catch up. brubeck will beat me to it. play his awful music to the frozen wastes. a waste of fuckin space. space monkey. i will eat them or they will eat me. are we moving?"

hours later he reached the bamboo chimes from their tarpaulin wrapping. "frozen to themselves. the wind howls through my thermal longjohns. no sound. only the ice and my flute." his grass skirt was solid, stuck to itself. "there is no symmetry, only the ice. the water of everything. nothing. all is illusion. i am gone. i am not."

minutes later he came to on all fours. "no scales in infinity dave. no scales in infinity. i will listen to the ice. my flute will join the music of all that is." he put his ear to the ice. there was an almighty silence. the cold filled his ear and then it filled his brain. then he was dead.

hours later he was one with the ice. his flute stood up erect from the ice. he was dead.

One minute later, four big tyres, supporting a large land rover, pulled up on the ice, alongside his head. "Ok you guys, you know the drill. Put him in the trunk." Footsteps on the snowy ice.

"Goddam, boss this stuff's slippery."

"Boss, think you better come look at this."

"What? What's to see? Just get him up off the ground and into the trunk."

He had a new tune going round his head. He wrote the chords down on a match box. "Shit, yeah, I think this one's in one hundred and sixty four eleven time." He chuckles to himself. "Hot damn. The good old days are coming back."

"Boss?"

"Ok. Ok."

"It's his head. His face. It's stuck to the ice."

"What's with you guys. We've planned for this. You know we have. Get the goddam primus stove out. Hot water is what we need. We'll have some coffee while we're at it. Jeez this place is the end. Cold, or what?"

As the strong dark espresso eased his troubled mind, he whistled Bridge over Troubled Water to himself. "I kept telling you to step on the gas Morelloid."

"Yeah sure boss, and you also kept telling me to play fuckin riffs on my goddam tenor, while I was tryna drive. And I'm pretty sure, even out here, that aint strictly legal. I coulda lost points off my license pal."

They pour hot water over his Paul's frozen face, till eventually there's a thaw between him and the ice. Dave shoots each of the dogs in the head to accompanying yelps. They dump him in the trunk and drive off.

"Hey Paul, yeah, it's Braxton here, yeah. Listen man there's this guy over in England they reckon plays even more anodyne tone than you man, more bland even, like he's the fucken total BLANDMEISTER or somethin'"

"Sorry, are you chewing something Anthony? I can't make out what you're saying."

"There's this guy in England man, alto player who I think you should hear. A real SLIGHT kinda tone, almost nothing there you dig? Name's Dank-somethin'. Some kinda dank name y'know. Mystical cat too, does the White Voodoo apparently. Married to a black chick. Well, kinda black i guess."

"You still fooling around with the flute?"

"Yeah man, 'Fool's Bamboo' as they say. I gotta try & learn it though, for this thing with Marilyn. Got this booking at a pasta joint up in Vancouver."

Later, after Braxton was gone off the phone & everything had fallen back into stillness, Paul Desmond lay awake staring at the clapboard ceiling. This Dankworth business was beginning to disturb him. This wasn't the first time someone had tried to hip him to this English guy. Saxophone tone like milk in water. Plays with almost no attack, no inflection. Nothing there behind the sound. Almost no sound at all, if reports were true. Nothing there man, no feeling, no soul.

Shadows run towards you. The night pulls you into its vortex. Flicker of stars. Naked skin in firelight. The distorted faces of the dancers. Blood. Feathers. A black cockerel. Unspeakable rites hidden, veiled. The low throb of drums always there in the distance. Ghost trains passing in his sleep.

"Paul, Paul, wake the fuck up! You were screaming."

Lauretta stands in the doorway in laddered stockings. Moonlight silvering the edge of her hair. Smoking a goddamn cigarette & breath loaded with Jim Beam. Or Wild Turkey...Too late to tell anyway, the

bottle comes flying right at him, shattering in the corner. Broken glass raining down like falling stars.

"okay, that's it you goddam unreasonable fuckin whore." He picked up the broken bottle got out of bed and walked towards her, her drunken face in the centre of his radar scanner.

"Oh jeez, I'm so scared. Is he back in his goddam jesus mood again?" She started to smile but the broken glass interrupted the movement of muscle. Her skin broke. His fist came in behind the bottle.

"All you ever fuckin do is swear and cuss me, you fucking bitch." Over and over he stabs her, in the neck, the chest, her hands as they try to defend herself, her stomach.

When it's all over he looks at the blood dripping from the bamboo chimes. This is the only tragedy he sees; that his chimes are sullied. He is glad he's finally smashed the shitty life out of her. He asks himself how long he's been enduring this wreck of a woman thrashing around in his space, contaminating the air, the peace, the acoustic.

Taking the smallest of the flutes in his shaking, bloodsoaked hand he puts it into a backpack and starts to pack. "Think it's time to head north. No more commerce and trade and too much brute ugliness. Gotta go." He is whispering. "Gotta go." He is whimpering. He is softly crying. Like he used to in the cupboard, under the stairs when he was a boy, listening for the creak of footsteps that preceded his release. He used to whisper to himself "it'll all be okay." Over and over. "It'll all be okay. Don't worry." Then he'd make up tunes, silently, in his mind.

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder her steps over her body. Something wheezes. Air or a fart, or something coming out of her. "Head for the snow, buddy. Head for the snow. There's nothing and no one here for you."

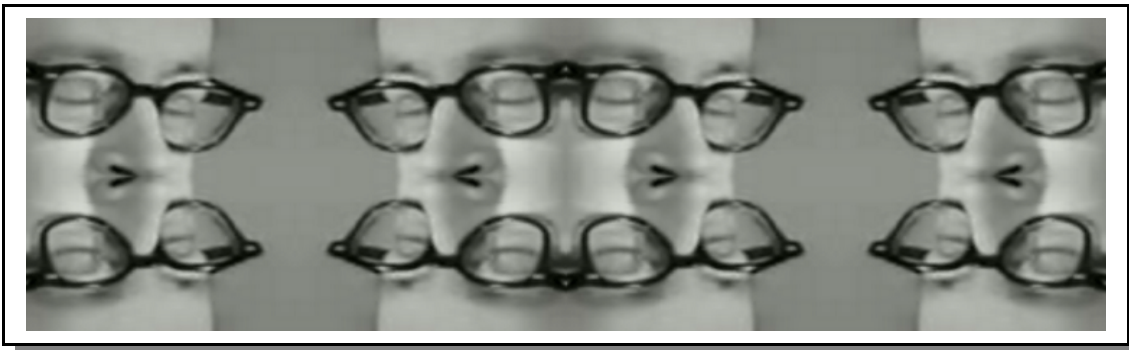
King Of Dogshit & Twigs

"All contemporary musical life is dominated by the commodity form..."

"Yeah, maybe, but listen to this..."

A familiar hellish skronking noise, BBBBAaaauugggghh!!!, split notes, reedsequeak...

"Beautiful, man, just beautiful"



The language of music is quite different from the language of intentionality. It contains a theological dimension. What it has to say is simultaneously revealed and concealed. Its Idea is the divine Name which has been given shape. It is demythologized prayer, rid of efficacious magic. It is the human attempt, doomed as ever, to name the Name, not to communicate meanings.

Who could have foretold this New Orleans revival, nearly twenty-five years after Bunk Johnson acquired his new teeth?

"Listen man, I'll tell you a little secret: The most drastic example of standardization of presumably individualized features is to be found in so-called improvisations. Even though jazz musicians still improvise in practice, their improvisations have become so "normalized" as to enable a whole terminology to be developed to express the standard devices of individualization: a terminology which in turn is ballyhooed by jazz publicity agents to foster the myth of pioneer artisanship and at the same time flatter the fans by apparently allowing them to peep behind the curtain and get the inside story. This pseudo-individualization is prescribed by the standardization of the framework. The latter is so rigid that the freedom it allows for any sort of improvisation is severely delimited. Improvisations — passages where spontaneous action of individuals is permitted ("Swing it boys") — are confined within the walls of the harmonic and metric scheme. In a great many cases, such as the "break" of pre-swing jazz, the musical function of the improvised detail is determined completely by the scheme: the break can be nothing other than a disguised cadence. Here, very few possibilities for actual improvisation remain, due to the necessity of merely melodically circumscribing the same underlying harmonic functions. Since these possibilities were very quickly exhausted, stereotyping of improvisatory details speedily occurred. Thus, standardization of the norm enhances in a purely technical way standardization of its own deviation — pseudo-individualization.

"This subservience of improvisation to standardization explains two main socio-psychological qualities of popular music. One is the fact that the detail remains openly connected with the underlying scheme so that the listener always feels on safe ground. The choice in individual alterations is so small that the perpetual recurrence of the same variations is a reassuring signpost of the identical behind them. The other is the function of "substitution" — the improvisatory features forbid their being grasped as musical events in themselves. They can be received only as embellishments. It is a well-known fact that in daring jazz arrangements worried notes, dirty notes, in other words, false notes, play a conspicuous role. They are apperceived as exciting stimuli only because they are corrected by the ear to the right note. This, however, is only an extreme instance of what happens less conspicuously in all individualization in popular music. Any harmonic boldness, any chord

which does not fall strictly within the simplest harmonic scheme demands being apperceived as "false", that is, as a stimulus which carries with it the unambiguous prescription to substitute for it the right detail, or rather the naked scheme. Understanding popular music means obeying such commands for listening. Popular music commands its own listening habits... dig?"

Cool Burnin' With The Chet Baker Quintet (1965)

The dry nylon landscape stretches out, an orange and purple blur. Air crackles with atatic. Hairball tumbleweeds. Nail clippings, some sort of fur...Brown bottles, cottonballs, a blackened spoon.

Scrape of eyeball on motel carpet. Brown afternoon light. Light sucked from the room, out through dust-colored curtains...

The dry tongue searches for moisture. Skull a pulse of hard pain. The sink, get to the fucken sink... Scudding water into his gaping mouth triggers splintering teeth... ACHE...Water that tastes like chalk, like blood...

"Aw, shit, fuck shit..."

Chet Baker clicks the overhead light, shaves with trembling long-fingered hands, squinting into the foxed mirror. Ravines run vertically down the ruined cliff of his face. 'Craggy good looks' - ahem yes, takes some fuckin' maintenance these days...

A stay-pressed button-down shirt from the cardboard suitcase. Pomade for the unwashed hair. Good as fuckin' new.

Now, just a quick little taste while stocks last, then maybe have me a good look thru the old address book...

"To absent friends..."

* * *

The puppies thrashed and yelped with excitement. YAP YAP YAP YAP! Their little bellies slapping and skittering on the parquet floor. Paws slipping out from under them as they scurried towards the telephone table, where they clamboured ontop of eachother, wheezing and panting and yelping until Mrs. Desmond lifted the receiver.

"Hello, Desmond residence..."

A voice like desert wind, husks of breath almost devoid of life, a dry sucking sound came from the earpiece. A vampyric rustling, almost a death rattle...but urgent and alive with suppressed need. She almost had to hold the phone at arms length with revulsion.

"No, Mister Baker, I'm afraid Paul isn't here right now. No, I don't know when he will be back, he's out on tour at the moment. Yes, I'll be sure he gets your message..."

Not given to strong drink, she nevertheless had to pour herself a gin & tonic and sat hugging herself by the dogbasket until long after the dachshund pups had fallen back to sleep.

Chet Baker: Hauntingly beautiful, perpetually troubled. Baker wore his dark suits and white shirts with an insouciance only a jazz legend could muster.

1941 Martin trumpet.

“Basically, all the great trumpet players, Miles, Chet, all played a particular brand of trumpet called a Martin, made in Wisconsin.”

Now that we are going on a trip...

“If my decomposing carcass helps nourish the roots of a juniper tree or the wings of a vulture – that is immortality enough for me. And as much as anyone deserves.”

He simply fell out of the window...

An automobile is just a tool

Chet Baker like a shadow passing through the bright afternoon. Yellow flowers by the roadside. Haze of dust. Elbowing aside the Mexicans as he moves through the market stalls. Finally selecting a large & already battered-looking straw hat. A few scattered pesos, eyes invisible behind shades.

“YOU ARE NOW LEAVING NEW MEXICO – ‘LAND OF ENCHANTMENT’ ”

Dead roadsigns litter the desert. Cracked lips whistling an old tune: “Where The Columbines Grow...”

Yeah, I'll remember that one, maybe we can work up a head arrangement. These old frontier songs go down real good with the socialites. Desmond'll play it real purty.

Hit the interstate up into Colorado, route 25 all the way passing thru all these dead joints, vultures, buzzards... billboards & truckstops... whenever he saw a billboard he wanted to tear the son of a bitch down - specially when it had his own face on it...

Friday, February 11, 2005

Dear Mr. Braxton,

I have had the good fortune to chance upon your web-log, and would like to take this opportunity to share with your readers some reminiscences of my own.

In the summer of 1958 I found myself in the strange position of being Tour-Manager to a group of visiting American jazzmen, a job for which I was not remotely qualified. It happened that my dear friend Max Harrison, the noted jazz critic, was to have chaperoned the entourage, but was taken rather ill at the last moment.

So it was, then, one warm July evening that I found myself on the quayside at Harwich waiting to meet the boat from Holland.

As the vessel hove into sight through the gathering mist, I felt a sudden and unseasonal chill which penetrated to my very core. But even at that early hour of the night, the sound of merriment and the tinkling of glasses preceded the boat across the water.

Soon my charges were assembled in the terminal, and a hearty band of fellows they seemed to me. Eugene Wright, dwarfed by his double bass; Morello, the jester of the bunch with a team of porters to carry his jumble of percussion items to the charabanc; Mr. Brubeck and Mr. Desmond, both the very epitome of elegance and New World charm, although I found the bright check of their matching sports-jackets to be rather dazzling in the low sun. Cordial introductions were made all around, and we presently were on our way.

It is not necessary here to give full details of our journey from Harwich, except to say that for one reason or another we were obliged to make many unscheduled stops, and by the time we approached the outskirts of London the hour was quite late. In view of this it was decided that I should put the band up for the night, rather than navigate through the infernal London traffic in search of a suitable hotel.

When we reached Ponders End, my dear wife Edna was at the door to greet us and the fine aroma of traditional English Hot-Pot wafted on the honeysuckled air.

After some confusion during which Mr. Morello managed to inhale part of the repast, our guests were shown to the spare room where they were to spend the night.

I do not care to know what went on behind that door, but I dare say strong liquor and tobacco were taken in some quantity.

home is the hunter...

'Honey, I'm Home!'

He lugged the suitcase up the wooden porch steps, brushing aside the yelping dachshunds, and banging his shin hard on the old rocking chair.

Inside the kitchen the fresh smell of floor polish hung in the air. The gingham checked curtains fluttered gently. The sun was still high and a warm golden light spilled through the clean sparkling window pane.

Mrs. Desmond dropped the bright yellow duster when she saw him there. 'Paul, Paul, where on earth have you been, I've been so worried. Heavens Honey, I must have called Mister Brubeck a hundred times, and you know how he hates to be disturbed at home..'

A slight spark of static from her nylons. Tic-tac of heels on the parquet floor as she crossed to the icebox.

'Yeah, that motherfucker's worse than a goddam priest...'

She chose to ignore this uncharacteristic outburst. Two dry martinis appeared on the green formica table.

Paul Desmond eased off his brogues & flexed his toes inside his argyle socks. A runty sausage dog nuzzled up against his feet. Yeah, I'm home...

That night they lay in their twin beds in the moonlit room, unused to each-other's company: 'Paul, I'm worried about that smell, it's getting worse...'

In the kitchen the dogs kept sniffing around the suitcase, whimpering and scrabbling at the corners.

He was awake before dawn, dragging the goddam case in a trail of slime and gore out thru the back door, trying not to bump too loudly on the wooden steps. Okay, get the sonofabitch into the garage.

He took the yard rake and covered his tracks. In the house the dogs were already licking at the bloody seepage. The floor would have to be washed and polished again, that's for sure.

they attempt to represent complex philosophical truths



“These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve

And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

'VIDEO CAMERAS ARE IN OPERATION IN THIS AREA'

||-|`_-----_*

ARCHIVE MATERIAL, source unknown



they have never once met. they were once at the same party. at this point they both had moustaches. miles davis was cajoling cecil saying "you're a white motherflipper cecil, all you play is goddam motherflippin white classical crap. you says it's the blues but it ain't." apparently cecil got on the piano and was joined by mary lou williams and they played some very down home church music. paul desmond who was there having just given anthony braxton some saxophone playing tips jumped up all excited and challenged cecil to play some monk. cecil taylor got very enthused, started sayin "if i'm gonna play monk the goddam piano has to be jammed in the kitchen doorway." so they all start humping this grand piano out of the study into the kitchen doorway and indeed cecil did do some very nice renditions of monk tunes. then he gets up, and climbs out the window, and down the fire escape just as ornette walks in the front door. this is the closest these two out cats ever came to meeting. also out of this party came a life long friendship between braxton and desmond, both of whom, as it happens, shared a love for sausage dogs. and of course the cecil mary lou duet album. but what did ornette get out of the whole thing? "sweet f.a. man. story of my goddam life." were ornette's words.

An Appreciation of Sergey Kuryokhin: On the Occasion of a Reissue of *Some Combinations of Fingers and Passion*

By Seth Watter



The philosopher Didi-Huberman writes of hysteria that it is “a thousand forms, in none.” All the attempts of Professor Charcot and his colleagues at the Salpêtrière to photograph hysterical women, in the name of objective science, were doomed to fail; because a still image of a hysteric is essentially only the picture of an intermittence, a gap between the phases of a hysterical attack. The actual phenomenon is an unpredictable unfolding of contradictory states, agony, *jouissance*, terror, hope, dementia, insight...

So it is with the work of Sergey Kuryokhin, whose music flirts with hysteria. And so it is with the writer who attempts to describe this music, condemned to record in words only intermittences: for the real substance of Kuryokhin’s art is the transition from one mode to another, each style in isolation telling us nothing. What is being told is the story of an instrument, the piano, and its circuitous route between past and future.

The distant past (the 19th century)—an illustrious history of composers, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, all bourgeois,

aristocrats, relics of feudalism. The recent past (the revolution, Stalin, the Cold War)—a Soviet campaign to renew interest in popular folk forms, music of the rural poor, a proletarian music. The present, the time of Kuryokhin's maturity (1981-1996)—*Glasnost*, *Perestroika*, the loosening of cultural oppression and renewed trade with the Western world, the rapid deterioration of the USSR as a world power; which also meant a renewed interest in jazz, a music suppressed by government on and off since its formative years. The future—a reconciliation of the different phases of Russian art, a music both national and international, structured and improvised, populist and avant-garde, a music recklessly tossed into the arena of world culture.

Some Combinations of Fingers and Passion (1991) reflects something of this matrix. How much, I am unsure; but certainly it is one of the late Soviet Union's greatest achievements. And it emerged, joyous, exuberant, august and consummative, at the same historical moment its motherland was on the precipice of a great collapse and dissolution. "A poet's speech begins a great way off... The eclipses of poets are not foretold in the calendar" (Tsvetaeva). What seems inopportune may be the blessing of foresight.

In a recent article (*Signal to Noise*, no. 56), I wrote the following:

Contradiction is at the heart of Kuryokhin's career; it is one of the hallmarks of his genius. Crudely speaking, these contradictions number among themselves several binaries: constraint/freedom, tradition/progress, affectation/spontaneity, perhaps even—a mythological conception of East/West. No musician before or since has so fully embodied the contradictions of the Soviet Union while making music that so gloriously transcends them, making each pair of oppositions fissure in every direction until they explode into pure force.

That was in reference to a concert of 1988 (the recently issued *Absolutely Great!*). I think, three years later, the description does not hold quite so much water, if only because these heterodox influences on the musician have finally been condensed into a form so polished as to veil the workmanship from which it was painstakingly crafted. The pianist does not want postmodern distancing *à la* John Zorn; he has become tired of these myriad forms that do not congeal in the work of art so much as sit side by side under the arbitrary banner of the 'artwork'. There are no longer abrupt shifts from jazz to opera, from rock to waltz; that sort of aesthetic violence went out with the bathwater somewhere en route from *The Ways of Freedom* (1981) to *Some Combinations*; or perhaps it was merely shouldered onto Kuryokhin's other longterm project, Orkestra Pop-Mekanika, the multi-media ensemble (music, film, performance, dance, zoology) which I called "a tireless effort to keep the state of Soviet

culture in a permanent state of carnival.” *Some Combinations of Fingers and Passion* is the result of a great purification: not of Kuryokhin’s prodigious musical vocabulary, but of the antagonisms which previously gave it voice.

Speaking of *The Ways of Freedom*.—A wonderful first recording, completely anarcho-destructive of its idiom(s) used as cannon fodder for blunderbusses of improvised runs, manic twittering like a possessed pianola (unclear whether the speed of the recording was changed, the keys sound so tinny and unreal), supremely gestural, each line a percussive blow (aimed at who?), the instrument opened up for dissection and vivisection—literally!—slapping and bruising the insides, playing all its hammers, rollers, strings, springs—pounding away in the very joy of destruction! (Joe Milazzo of *One Final Note*: “the sound of a young man, reared in a very particular tradition of instrumental virtuosity, discovering and delighting in his powers of musical subversion.”) The music was considered so repugnant to official taste that it was secretly recorded and smuggled to England as the inaugural release of producer Leo Feigin’s eponymous label.

Is it jazz? Underneath all the obfuscating factors, something of that art form remains. It is not often that jazz shows itself naked and unabashed in Kuryokhin’s music (though he did briefly tackle Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” in 1984). It bears repeating, though, that anyone playing jazz in Russia would be implicated in a complicated legacy. “The Music of the Gross” (Gorky, 1928):

In the deep stillness resounds the dry knocking of an idiotic hammer. One, two, three, ten, twenty strokes, and after them, like a mud ball splashing into clear water, a wild whistle screeches; and then there are rumblings, wails and howls like the smarting of a metal pig, the shriek of a donkey, or the amorous croaking of a monstrous frog. This insulting chaos of insanity pulses to a throbbing rhythm. Listening for a few minutes to these wails, one involuntarily imagines an orchestra of sexually driven madmen conducted by a man-stallion brandishing a huge genital member.

(A film made around this time, *Taxi Blues* [Lungin, 1990], helped cement this association of jazz with Western decadence; a cab driver who despises his saxophone-playing neighbor is unashamed to say he misses the guidance of strong centralized government.)

I think there is reticence in the early Kuryokhin to let jazz *be* jazz. Thus he made his music distinctly inhuman, certainly asexual, and buried his Willie “The Lion” riffs beneath a torrent of atonal thrashing-about and pointillist abstraction—at loggerheads with his muse.



No such shame on *Fingers and Passion*; it is a sustained meditation on jazz, not just the harmonics of jazz but the *swing* and the *feel* of jazz. Of course, he couldn't entirely throw off the heritage of virtuosic Russian artistry, beautiful and baroque; I would say Kuryokhin never got *quite* as earthy as his famous contemporaries, the Ganelin Trio. But "A Combination of Power and Passion" is one of the few occasions I know of when he really dug deep into post-war American jazz, particularly Dave Brubeck's music—the song's subtitle, after all, is "Blue Rondo a la Russ". The West Coast master's rhythmic innovations must have left their imprint on Kuryokhin, who had little to no respect for standard jazz time signatures. If on previous recordings the Russian pianist let his hands compartmentalize the keyboard, agitating each other, creating a fractured-hysterical aesthetic, here they work together with interlocking melodies and rhythmic counterpoint. All the effort of moving between styles is so gradual and mellifluous, the listener is generally unable to pinpoint the decisive moment of transformation. By varying the pace and delivery of Brubeck's central theme, gaining momentum with a sportsman's fervor or slowing down in a staccato articulation, he allows room for new aspects to emerge, aspects which derail the music and force it to ceaselessly evolve. As soon as one has grasped the theme of a cluster of repetitions, already the music seems elsewhere. The most sublime improvisations operate in this manner, like

the churning factory of the unconscious, bringing bits and fragments of memory-experience to light before burying them beneath revisions, detours, reversals and variations.

The verdict is still out on whether or not God exists; but if he did, Sergey Kuryokhin would have been his gift to the piano. The half-hour “Combination of Passion and Feelings” which begins the album is the kind of declamation orators only dream of, a tour-de-force as muscular as a Cossack, delicate and pastoral like a wheat field. There is love, terror, sentiment, festivity, vertigo, a whole spectrum of emotions on display within this performance. Yet to isolate its phases, to hold them up as illustrations of a musical lexicon, would destroy what makes it so fascinating, which is the dissolving of one into the other: the process, the passing-through.

“A Combination of Hands and Feet” betrays the artist’s penchant for humor. He had a biting wit, but is mostly remembered for a playful jackdaw mentality. The brand of slobbery he kept in abeyance with his hands more often than not came to fruition through the voice. Not that the pianist sings: one is more likely to distinguish gurgles, cries, squawks or whistles. The absurdity of matching such serious music with these shrill aleatorics is not unlike the solemnity of Wile E. Coyote crushed beneath another russet-colored boulder. “Hands and Feet”, part-ballad, part-waltz, is the closest he comes to genuine tenderness—which is never without a wink.

“A Combination of Boogie and Woogie” is the most straightforward piece Kuryokhin ever performed as a solo artist, playing in the two-beat style of American piano giants James P. Johnson, Luckey Roberts and Meade Lewis. It’s close to gutbucket, but specifically Russian with its sense of high drama and capacity for florid embellishment. Even if it isn’t quite the barrelhouse, it makes good on the promise of its title; for once, there is reverence on the performer’s part for the standard beat, and as anyone who likes a good boogie-woogie knows, that striding rhythm is simply unstoppable.

Poets invite us to dream, writes Bachelard. One says there are moonbeams in the linen closet; Reason sees through this logical aporia, but the imagination continues to be stimulated, carried aloft to new heights. Kuryokhin’s reverie was one in which East and West were not only united, but had lost all meaning: a daydream of a distant future, or a distant impossible.

GENDER & MUSIC: 'IN OUR DIFFERENT RHYTHMS TOGETHER'

By Maggie Nicols

Maybe one day, there will no longer be the need for special features on gender; a post Patriarchal Capitalist society will experience genuine diversity & humankind's multidimensional difference will be what unifies us. Until then, I'm happy to grapple with the contradictions of gender & music in our time.

Is there such a thing, outside cultural conditioning, as feminine or masculine music? I can only write from the limited perspective of history, personal political experience & the times we live in now.

So many of my most precious musical moments are shared with other women now that sometimes I forget what it was like before the women's liberation movement, when meaning & value was defined predominantly by men. Literature, music, religion, politics, you name it; men battled ideas amongst themselves & women were mainly their muses, an influence behind the scenes: "behind every great man," etc.

When I first started listening to jazz, I naively believed that men were more biologically suited to playing instruments. It was what I saw; female singers & male instrumentalists. The pop music I listened & danced to; soul, rock 'n roll, all the same. Of course there were also male singers in all those musics but very few female instrumentalists. It was a few years before I saw saxophonist Vi Redd down Ronnie Scott's jazz club in Gerard Street. Even then, it was said she played like a man.

I yearned to be part of the wonderful music I heard. I was in love with music of all kinds but particularly jazz. Unfortunately many male musicians mistook my love of music for a willingness to be manipulated or even coerced into giving them sexual favours. Male acceptance & approval was everything to me which left me vulnerable to my own romantic notions about their beautiful souls & a prey to casual sexism. I was sweet sixteen & hungry to be a musician, which, given what I knew, meant being a singer. I got my first break singing in a strip club & later was taken under the wing of the brilliant pioneer of bebop in Britain, trumpeter & pianist Dennis Rose, who played in North London pubs.

In the jazz world there was an ambivalence if not downright dislike towards all but the most established female singers ; an assumption that they would be rubbish & / or a resentment of their place at the centre of the audience's attention. However, male front line instrumentalists rarely

came in for the same hostility even though some of them were perfectly capable of completely ignoring their supporting rhythm sections when they took a solo.

My need to be accepted as a bona fide practitioner of a music that moved & inspired me so profoundly was probably one of the major if unconscious driving forces behind my developing my voice as an instrument. It was also intensive listening to a huge diversity of brilliantly expressive instrumentalists even if they were all male.

Dennis started me on the road to legitimacy as a musician. Through my work with him I got to sing with other musicians & then there came a time when I basked in their praise & approval. I was better than those other 'chick singers'; my low self esteem fed a feeling of false superiority to my singing sisters.

Later, as I grew in confidence, I occasionally took delight in going along to jam sessions where I wasn't known & seeing the conspiratorial rolled eyes & the low expectations of a female singer turn to respect & amazement once I started singing.

Confidence is the operative word here cos even now with all my experience, I can suddenly feel like I don't deserve to be in the hallowed company of 'real musicians' (men); can doubt my musicianship & feel shriveled up & small, especially around musicians who knew me a long time ago. It doesn't happen so often now but enough to want to do all I can to support other women starting out. I'm saddened to hear that so many are still getting a hard time.

There was another man that I learnt a lot from & started singing with in 1968 when I was twenty. Drummer & free improvisation innovator & enabler John Stevens honoured & adored the female voice. He was one of the first musicians I knew to fully integrate the human voice into his ensembles; we weren't just occasionally decorative or floating ethereally on top. We were another equal but distinctive colour in the overall sound like the difference between a trombone & a trumpet or guitar. Even in free improvisation this was radical stuff.

John turned everything upside down for everyone, women & men alike. He was a pioneer of a collective approach to music which also liberated individuality. Even in the midst of a profoundly sexist music scene I have to give credit to those men whose humanity sometimes managed to transcend gender stereotypes and oppression. There were & are many men who I consider as part of the wonderful extended family of musicians that I am so blessed to be a part of but for a while, as the only

woman, I had a period where I became 'one of the boys'. Like many other female musicians, before we met each other, I did a pretty good job of it, raving with the best of them, & it was great cos at least I was respected as a 'fellow' musician. I still needed that male approval.

Apart from with singer Julie Tippetts one of my dearest musical soul mates, & in the revelatory voice workshops I started running in 1969, most of my intimate musical experiences had been with men. Then came my exposure to the women's liberation movement in the mid seventies & everything changed again! After mainly being the only woman in all male ensembles, I was now immersed in an all female world. I fell in love with women. I started to understand that what had happened to me wasn't just personal, it was political. I came out as a lesbian & I wanted to sing with other female musicians. The Feminist Improvising Group was born & although we're in danger of being written out of history, we had a huge impact on the improvised music scene. We were loved & hated. We were provocative & perversely diverse in class, sexuality, race, disability & musical background & technique. It was my first experience of singing with women instrumentalists & it was wonderful.

We didn't set out to call ourselves FIG but when I got us our first gig at a 'Music for Socialism' event, as the Women's Improvising Group, the leaflets came out with the 'F' word & we took that name on board & really ran with it! I don't think the organisers realised what they'd unleashed. We rose to the occasion in ways which both delighted & threatened.



Above: Photograph by Valerie Wilmer of the first ever gig by The Feminist Improvising Group, at a 'Music For Socialism' event. Corine Liensol, trumpet, Lindsay Cooper bassoon/saxes, Nicols in the wig, Georgie Born cello & Cathy Williams piano.

The difference that our gender made to me was in the intimacy we shared before & after as well as during the music. It was in the heady early days of sisterhood before the inevitable realisation that identity also contains difference. We were discovering our shared experience of isolation & discrimination as women in a male dominated world. We were anarchic & unapologetic about overturning many of the assumptions about technique. In the beginning it was an open pool of improvisers open to all women, mixed ability in the conventional sense but each woman crucial to the overall social virtuosity that our performances expressed. It was truly liberating to stop worrying, for a while at least, about what men thought of us. We laughed when over & over we were asked 'why only women?' as if it had escaped the notice of the various questioners that the majority of ensembles were all male. The listening, the interaction, the humour, the politics, the hanging out. I was finally one of the women not one of the boys.

FIG opened the door into a whole new world of creative empowerment & many of us went on to play with each other in different combinations & still do to this day. Corine Liensol & I started 'Contradictions' with Irene Schweizer & dancer Roberta Garrison which I later developed as an open women's workshop performance group, involving both improvised & written music, theatre, visuals & dance. Irene Schweizer founded E.W.I.G (European Women's Group) which brought in new women like bassist Joelle Leandre & singer Annick Nozati. One of my favourite group experiences was the first women's improvised music festival 'Canaille' organised by Dutch trombonist Anne Marie Roelofs (also an ex FIG member) in Frankfurt. We played in different combinations & the enthusiasm for each group as we cheered each other proudly from the side of the stage, was totally uplifting & everyone excelled even more because of it; great music & inspired performances.

Women playing together & promoting each other against all the odds brought on the era of more mixed gender groups. I remember cellist Martin Altena saying how much he preferred playing in groups that were not exclusively male. The joy I experience when surrendering to the Muse & trusting myself, the music, the other musicians & each unfolding moment, happens with men too but it happens more often with women or when there are other women present (Maybe my gender influences the music even when I'm the only woman in the group).

I have just come back from a wonderful experience singing with trombonist Gail Brand & a Belgian pianist Marjolaine Charbin that Gail & I had never met before. We did two gigs - the first one was sheer magic, a multiplicity of twists & turns. There was a free flow of different & sometimes simultaneously different dynamics a kind of musical multi orgasmic multi- tasking. A singer called Martha in the audience said listening to us as women was different to listening to men, not better, different.

The second gig was harder because of a grim venue literally divided in two by a concrete wall. The music was still strong but constructed more of struggle rather than trust & it was great to be able to share our feelings about the challenging personal processes we'd just gone through; less analytical than some discussions I've had or read about the music but no less insightful & certainly less divisive.

There is a deliriously divine combination of sensitivity & anarchic wildness I experience with women when we let ourselves be fearless & let go of needing to prove ourselves in a still predominantly male music scene. Is it a socialised ability to surrender to flow & wander & meander that is harder for men who are maybe more socialised to stay in control?

I cannot generalise too much about gender & music though because there are men who can be possessed by the music & women who put up barriers, but in my experience those multidimensional moods that I love so much in free improvisation are something I associate most with all the wonderful women I work with. Even in bands where we play tunes, there is a particular dynamic in rehearsals that makes me feel easier in my skin when I work with women or at least with men that love & respect women's presence & musicianship.

There was one group of male musicians however where I found a similar openness & freshness; the improvisers I met in the former DDR (East Germany). They hadn't been overdosed with the Western stimuli that had made many of our male artists jaded & cynical & striving to come up with ever cleverer concepts. Although due to different circumstances, the East German musicians, like women, had not been a major part of the Western music scene, so shared a similar sense of adventure & exploring new territory that can come from being excluded. When I heard guitarist Joe Sachse & trombonist Hanes Bauer for the first time I felt like I was enjoying a thriller. I was on the edge of my seat. It was not stylistic, it could go anywhere.

I've noticed that certain male musicians & some of the female musicians who associate with them often identify themselves with one

particular concept or approach –minimalism, deliberately contrasting, etc – whereas women de-ideologised go where they please. Both have their strengths & weaknesses but I prefer the open ended approach unless it's a workshop or I'm exploring freedom through specific pieces which initially limit or focus the attention in a particular direction like some of John Stevens' pieces do.

Women are known for multi-tasking, men for single-minded focus. Are both genders capable of either? Yes, surely in the music we can all shape shift & focus. In the end, let it be down to preference rather than gender.

For me, free improvisation still promises the most freedom from gender biased limitations; women lead & focus as well as follow & surrender & vice versa for men, but no-one is a permanent leader or follower. This is certainly the case with the Gathering which I started hosting twenty years ago. It meets weekly in London & monthly in West Wales & has recently started in Liverpool.

“The Gathering is a space, place and time where we can build up confidence in our creativity; where we can sit in silence, sing, play an instrument, draw, be poetic; prophetic; we could talk in tongues, talk to each other, to ourselves, talk to voices. We can listen, make sounds; melodies and noise, soft and loud; leave space, fill it up; explore rhythm and time, chaos and rhyme; lullabies and laments; shyly and boldly be in our different rhythms together.”¹

I believe that men who associate with & are willing to learn from women as we have from men for so long, are discovering new ways to express their creativity. Ultimately, the mix of gender, culture, race, class, age & different abilities can enthrall & liberate us all.

¹ <http://www.maggiencols.com/id13.html>

YOUTUBE WATCH

Tania Chen/ Shabaka Hutchings/ Mark Sanders

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hmdotr17AWM>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zeOe9hDs-I>



This performance was filmed live by Helen Petts at one of John Russell's monthly Mopomoso nights at The Vortex in London (see www.mopomoso.com and <http://www.youtube.com/user/helentonic>). Shabaka Hutchings (pictured above), a truly fine player who was briefly name-checked in the previous issue of this magazine, is here paired with pianist Tania Chen (a classically-trained interpreter of Cage and Feldman, who has studied with John Tilbury) and veteran drummer Mark Sanders. The music begins quietly, gradually swelling from the silence as the trio feel their way, cautiously echoing each-other's instrumental lines. At 6:41, when some melodic agreement/ concord/ coming-together is reached between Chen and Hutchings, the silence is not allowed to roll to cessation, to applause and the appearance of a false 'conclusion'. Rather, Chen launches into a monologue – solo extrapolations on the melodic essence of the previous section – to which Sanders' bells impart a further meditative air. Hutchings builds circles

on a recurring pattern, spinning out and out in questioning webs; threads and journeys, quick forays, a rumbling panic-stricken march from Sanders' rumblings and Chen's lower-keyboard spikiness. When they reach another silence three minutes into the second clip a similar transformation could occur – but the applause cuts in and Chen shifts in her chair, smiling, in some way even embarrassed.

Given the way things start off on the second piece, the direction seems inevitable: Hutchings' clarinet sets out a kind of off-kilter motor-rhythm momentum into which Chen and Sanders could easily slot. But when they don't wholeheartedly join, the turn to quietness is both unexpected and completely convincing – a hush built from Hutchings' willingness to gauge the situation and to respond appropriately, Chen's refusal to play except when necessary, and Sanders' refusal to be the 'up-front' drummer.

Improvisations by one-off groups such as this one may develop in different ways to those by regular ensembles, which is part of the excitement of something like Mopomoso: the necessity of developing new approaches, of finding ways of working together, leads to a greater sense of risk, which can spur the musicians on to move outside their comfort zones. On the other hand, such risk can also generate a tendency towards politeness, a laudable desire not to assert oneself over others creating music that is, in the end, perhaps overly tentative in its approach. Such pit-falls are avoided here, for, while the three musicians are certainly respectful, paying careful attention to what their trio partners are doing at any particular moment, they are not afraid to take their improvisations in unexpected directions, yielding some fine results.

All About Cecil McBee

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slJX2-cyegQ>

The name of bassist Cecil McBee may have inadvertently become associated with a leading clothing store in Japan,¹ but it seems that his work as a bassist is still too often unacknowledged by both critics and public. That's a real shame, because his work on Pharoah Sanders' early 1970s albums for Impulse Records contains a textural richness and an emotional depth rarely matched in the more one-dimensional role which the instrument has had to play in much jazz music, perhaps the finest instance being his solo feature on 'Let Us Go Into the House of the Lord', from Sanders' 'Summun Bukmun Umyun.' The Sanders recordings also demonstrated that McBee was perfectly capable of playing in a more conventional, groove-based role, as attested by the hypnotic rhythmic interplay with Stanley Clarke on 'Black Unity' and 'Live at the East.'

¹ http://www.audiocasefiles.com/acf_cases/10125-mcbee-v-delica-co-

Continuing to work in the 'spiritual jazz' vein that characterized Sanders' output at this time, he recorded as leader for Strata-East: the varied 'Mutima' contained ensemble pieces with the singer Dee Dee Bridgewater, as well as a feature for two basses played at once.

The more recent video featured here is a podcast made by the 'Jazz Video Guy,' Bret Primack (<http://planetbret.com/>): it documents the recording sessions for the album 'Seraphic Light' by Coltrane tribute band Saxophone Summit (Joe Lovano and Dave Liebman, joined by Ravi Coltrane, who replaces the late Michael Brecker). Focusing on McBee, it mixes footage of the group laying down one of his compositions with 'talking-heads' interviews featuring the other musicians (including fellow veteran Billy Hart). Perhaps one day someone will make a full-length feature on McBee: for now, this short video provides an intriguing look at some of his working methods.

John Klemmer – 20th Century Blues/Late Evening Prayer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDTFbG7dHWs>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxUa5XcwQbU&feature=related>



The work for which John Klemmer has become known is not exactly my cup of tea – he's one of the principle culprits responsible for the growth of the smooth jazz movement – but, like fellow culprit Grover

Washington Jr., he was actually capable of playing some very fine jazz saxophone when he felt like it. He might never have become an absolutely top-rank musician anyway, but, by limiting himself to the unchallenging world of commercial smooth jazz, he ensured that he wouldn't even stand the ghost of a chance. Signed up to Impulse Records in the mid-70s as one of the new wave of young jazzers, he was seen at once as a firebrand in the Gato Barbieri/post-Coltrane vein, an experimental musician (through his use of Echoplex – which, ironically enough, was the tool which turned him to commercialism), and someone able to connect with more popular musical traditions (his very fine, non-Impulse record 'Blowin' Gold', which features Pete Cosey as a sideman, contained a cover of Hendrix' 'Third Stone from the Sun'). His tone is hard and steely, and he has a penchant for building his solos up to passionate squawks – it's a very direct approach, if not as *out-there* as Barbieri's, and you can see why Impulse had high hopes for Klemmer.

Neither the image nor the picture quality on these two videos, recorded at the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival, is very good (it's clearly been transferred from an old VHS), but Klemmer has a solid band to back him up as he opens with a solo echoplex ballad feature, which segues into a driving blues built around the dug-in bass-lines and comping of Cecil McBee, pianist Tom Canning, and drummer Alphonse Mouzon, best known himself for his fusion work. The second clip is a vamp-oriented track which contains the same exuberant skronking as 'Blowin' Gold', as well as an enthusiastic Mouzon solo.

Lucio Capece and Christian Kesten

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHg663iQIsc>



This is footage of what looks to have been a very focused small gathering at Labor Sonor, Kule, Berlin, back in December 2006, with the musicians sitting in a space that's barely separate from the audience, who are within touching distance. The atmosphere is one of respectful openness, and the music itself has a similar sense of space within it, opening up vistas of silence while at the same time being very intense, focused, even constricted, claustrophobic in its limitation of the sound field to extremely quiet 'extended techniques.' In such a context, playing a conventionally blown note or a recognisable harmonic progression would come as the biggest shock of all, and it's admirable that such a radically committed approach exists at all, an approach which provides an intensely absorbing *experience*. On one level, what we have here is in some way not 'reality' – it must take place behind closed doors, in chambers of quiet – yet at the same time it forces a concentration on the closest details and mechanics of bodily performance and of situation of sound, event and gesture in space: in other words, some fundamental aspects of the human experience.

What does this actually mean in terms of what we can see and hear in the video clips? Three minutes have gone by and hardly anything has happened (someone's mobile phone has unexpectedly gone off, the loudest sound we've heard so far). Capece starts to rotate a violin bow around the surface of his saxophone bell in a kind of machine rhythm. Kesten's hands are clasped between his legs, almost in an attitude of prayer. He doesn't sing, he simply breathes audibly. Capece swings a cardboard tube in circles to make music from the air. Kesten picks up some tiny plant pots from the floor and rubs them together.

But to go on describing the music in this way wouldn't do it justice, for it's not really concerned with presenting a narrative sequence of sound events – at least, not in any developmental sense; although, given the long periods of silence, even the smallest gesture can assume great drama, and the music necessarily unfolds along a linear axis, necessarily exists in unfolding time. Low-quality video is hardly a substitute for being in the same room as the musicians, especially with this kind of improvisation, but it's nice to get an extended glimpse at such an occasion. Just remember to use headphones...

CD REVIEWS INDEX

“Criticism is always the easiest art.”

- Cornelius Cardew

- AIDA SEVERO – Aida Severo
- ALLEN, CORY – The Fourth Way
- ARGUE, DARCY JAMES – Infernal Machines
- BARNACLED – Charles
- CÔTÉ, MICHEL F./ DONTIGNY, A_ – La Notte Fa
- DIXON, BILL – Tapestries for Small Orchestra
- FUTTERMAN, JOEL – Transition One: Solo Piano
- GIGANTOMACHIA – The Naked Future
- HARGROVE, ROY (BIG BAND) – Emergence
- LEE, PEGGY – New Code
- HOULE, VIVIEN – Trieze
- KREBS, ANNETTE/ NAKAMURA, TOSHIMARU – Siyu
- MERSON HESS, DAVE – Music from the film ‘Presence’
- MIMESYS – Mimesys
- PROFOUND SOUND TRIO – Opus De Life
- SCOTT-HERON, GIL – I’m New Here
- SKARABEE – Tlön
- SMITH, WADADA LEO – Spiritual Dimensions
- SPALDING, ESPERANZA – Esperanza
- SYLVIAN, DAVID – Manafon
- TAZARTÈS, GHEDALIA – Repas Froid
- THE THING – Bag It!
- THE THING – Now and Forever
- tusK – 10 Greatest Hits!
- WHOLE VOYALD, THE – In Repose (EP)
- WILSON, TONY (SEXTET) – The People Look Like Flowers At Last
- WALTER, WEASEL/ EDWARDS, MARC – Mysteries Beneath the Planet
- WOZZECK – Act I
- YAMAMOTO, ERI – Dologue
- YZIMALLOO – Unpop

Historical/ Re-issues

- BOYKINS, RONNIE – The Will Come, Is Now
- BRADFORD, BOBBY – With John Stevens & The Spontaneous Music Ensemble
- LANCASTER, BYARD – Personal Testimony: Then & Now
- THE REVOLUTIONARY ENSEMBLE – Vietnam
- TYLER, CHARLES – Charles Tyler Ensemble

Reviewers: David Grundy, Ian Thumwood, Daniel Larwood, Sandy Kindness

CD REVIEWS

AIDA SEVERO – AIDA SEVERO



aida severo

Label: Slam

Release Date: 2008

Tracklist: Hunter Gunter; Williams/Egan; Doce Ocho; Somervell/Somervell/Sarikis; Untitled; Williams/Somervell/Sarikis; For Bruno S

Personnel: Chris Williams: alto sax; Joe Egan: trumpet; Philip Somervell: piano; Colin Somervell: double bass; Vasilis Sarikis: drums

‘Aida Severo’ alternates ensemble material built around pianist Philip Somervell’s jazz-flavoured compositions with shorter free improvisations for smaller combinations of musicians within the group. The Brotherhood-of-Breath-tinged melody of ‘Hunter Gunter’ evolves into

some raucous collective improvisation, spurred by Chris Williams' alto sax, and climaxing about four minutes in with Joe Egan blowing fast, brash figures. From there the mood changes, Egan taking a solo which builds in burred tones over quiet, inquisitive bass, Somervell's piano rising in volume to usher in another climax and to spark a new section, possessing intensity of a different kind, as piano and drums skitter around the woody thrum of a bass solo before roiling chords bring back the acclamations of the melody.

Following this comes the first of the free improvisations, a duet between Williams and Egan, which finds them mostly working complementary lines, ranging into faster flights but staying mostly in the fairly subdued mood with which they end. 'Doce Ocho' is another fine composition by Somervell, alternating a delicious, almost classically-flavoured *moto perpetuo* piano figure with a unison theme whose rhythmic and harmonic flavour seems fairly typical of much modern British jazz (think Guy Barker, Gerard Presencer, and the like). Saxophone multiphonics and sliding bowed bass initiate a creakily mysterious feel for an initially drumless group improvisation; when the drums do enter, Somervell's piano becomes more skittish, though there is still plenty of space left during another solo by Egan, whose gruff, mid-range tone seems to owe something to Bill Dixon. A piano solo switches between jazz rhythms and rolling, quick-fire repetitions, ending on a series of repeated chords. The long, dying reverberations of the sustain pedal cue in a repeat of the composed material.

A free improvisation for the 'rhythm section' finds Somervell in discursive mood, staying within the lower to mid range of the keyboard, his brother plucking a steady but ambiguous course underneath, Sarikis contributing slowly emerging cymbal strokes and light taps which rise and fall along complementary melodic axes.

The next composition is 'Untitled', consisting of a song-like but slightly tricky melody stated by bright, optimistic saxophone and trumpet over the darker hues of a unison piano and bass vamp. In terms of colour and harmony, this comes across rather like Miles Davis' 1960s Quintet with Herbie Hancock: at one point, Somervell plays what sounds like a direct Hancock quote, and Egan's trumpet, though venturing down into some lower-register growls, is much more within traditional jazz parameters here than elsewhere on the disc. It's pretty and expertly executed – there can't really be any complaints with that. The final improvised piece is also the shortest, and provides an immediate contrast: frantic altissimo saxophone, drums and piano going for it full tilt, with a nicely controlled conclusion keeping things concise.

Though it might not be immediately clear from the scratchy opening, 'For Bruno S' is the disc's ballad, and I assume it's dedicated to the actor who starred in Werner Herzog's 'The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser' and 'Stroszek.' Somervell's melody is again a fine one, the man himself laying down some lovely chord progressions, the thing unfolding in a wistfully musing atmosphere, combining a certain aspect of melancholy with a more optimistic sense of beauty and contentment. The freer aspects, heard particularly in Egan's trumpet playing, build on and move beyond this mood without destroying it: passion within the bounds of an adaptable but clear structural framework. It's a lovely way with which to end what is, throughout, a very pleasurable listen. **(David Grundy)**

CORY ALLEN – THE FOURTH WAY

Label: Quiet Design

Release Date: 2008

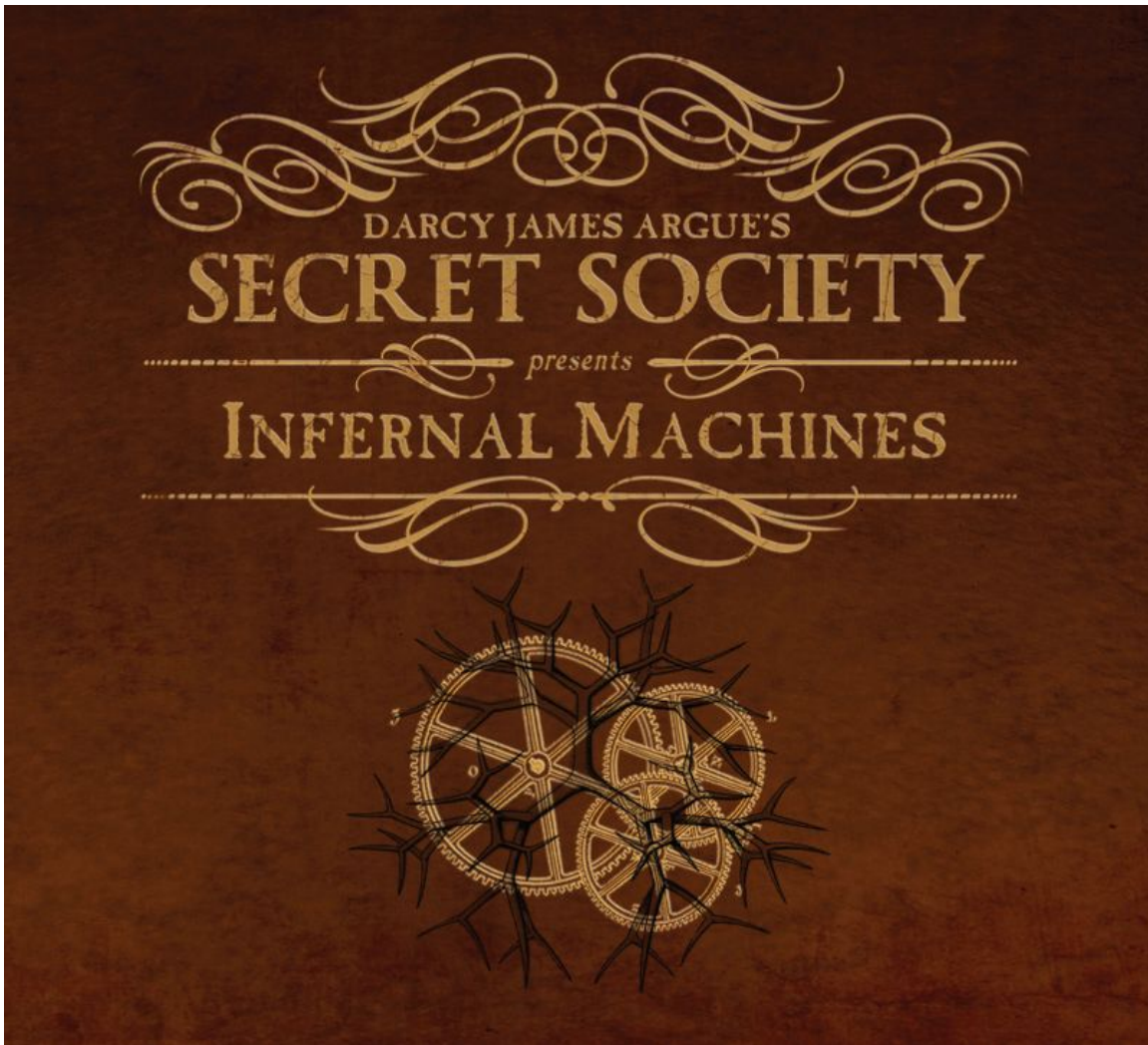
Tracklist: Exedra; Telepathic Solve; Chordata Analysis; In Search of Miracul; All Suns; Chordata Analysis [Animal Aggregation]; We Have Lots of Time

Personnel: Cory Allen: Moog, Fender Rhodes

'The Fourth Way' is ostensibly an album of beautiful, blissful drone material, but it contains some surprisingly harsh textures from the get-go, as the blistering clouds of static which open 'Exedra' refuse to give way to the choir-like chords which swell underneath. This doesn't feel like a 'battle' though, which is particularly nice to hear, given the way that often supposedly 'avant-garde' artists end up reinforcing the old melody vs noise dichotomy by contrasting pretty sounds with harsher ones to convey some sense of 'beauty under assault', rather than attempting to break down barriers between what is accepted and not accepted as 'beautiful'. In other words, their interest is in a rather old-fashioned kind of theatrics, rather than a more subtle textural approach. Of course, it's true, on a certain level, that drones and chords of a certain type are more 'pleasant' on the ear than the harsh buzzings and cracklings with which they are 'assaulted'; but, for me, Allen does more than simply contrast two sets of sounds. He realizes that to package off two aspects of experience and then to artificially pit them against one another is in some sense false, for the state of wonder is one of terror as well as blissful contemplation; states of mind, emotion and body are always combined in ways more complex than are simple dualistic categorisations allow. The effect of listening to a track like 'Telepathic Solve,' then, is like the effect of looking at the earth from space, of staring into the void-like distances beyond the stars, of watching shadows drift across the moon; a sense of a time that seems (whatever the reality) immeasurably slower than our own, where durations such as that of the human life hold very little meaning. It's cold and frightening, lacking the touch of heat and fervour that makes us think our humble little lives mean something, but it also awakens a longing within us which takes us

out of our box, our street, into a consideration of a kind of consciousness which one might call cosmic. There's something soothing about this: a giving over of oneself to mystery –not in the sense that one has to abandon a critical, questioning sense, to fall into any traps of false faith or hope or trust – not in the sense that one is bludgeoned, but ushered, willingly, into quietude and a kind of necessary state of acceptance. **(DG)**

DARCY JAMES ARGUE'S SECRET SOCIETY – *INFERNAL MACHINES*



Label: New Amsterdam Records

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Phobos; Zeno; Transit; Redeye; Jacobin Club; Habeas Corpus (for Maher Arar); Obsidian Flow

Personnel: Erica Von Kleist, Rob Wilkerson: flute, alto flute, soprano & alto saxophones; Sam Sadigursky: clarinet, soprano & tenor saxophones; Mark Small: clarinet, bass clarinet, tenor saxophone; Josh Sinton: clarinet, bass clarinet, baritone saxophone; Seneca Black: lead trumpet; Ingrid Jensen, Laurie Frink, Nadjé Noordhuis, Tom Goehring: trumpet, fluegelhorn; Ryan Keberle, Mike Fahie, James Hirschfeld: trombone; Jennifer Wharton: bass trombone; Sebastian Noelle: acoustic & electric guitars; Mike

Holoboer: piano & electric piano; Matt Clohesy: contrabass & electric bass; Jon Wikan: drum set, cajon, pandeiro, & misc. percussion

This debut CD has been much vaunted on a particular jazz website and it is fair to say that this big band is drawing audiences from beyond jazz. Impressive for a self-produced record, the appearance of Canadian composer Argue on disc represents a triumvirate of former Bob Brookmeyer students now finding themselves at the forefront of big band arranging, with Maria Schneider and John Hollenbeck already having established their reputations. In some respects this band appears to sit in between the styles of his two colleagues, offering a compromise between the kind of themes of which Schneider is so fond (“Zeno”, for example) and the punchy approach of Hollenbeck that looks beyond jazz for inspiration. Indeed, this band even shares some of the same personnel with these other bands. More closely, the band puts a nod in the direction of some of Gil Evans’ 1970s work, albeit without the older man’s immediate impact. As this record shows, orchestral jazz writing has now become increasingly complex since the days of Evans’ more minimal scores.

Uncompromisingly contemporary in many respects and clearly a product of the composer’s generation, the dominant solo voice being the rock-edged solo guitar of Sebastian Noelle, the music works best when the ensemble is playing full throttle. There are other soloists who are given chance to shine, such as trumpeter Ingrid Jensen and trombonist Ryan Keberle, but this is a record where the band itself is very much the star and the improvisation is a tad anonymous. On tracks like “Transit” you do sense the excitement built up in the head being dissipated within the first couple of bars of the trumpet solo, and you do wonder what a sprinkling of more established improvisers could have done for this music. Most of the names listed in the personnel are totally unknown to me. Argue’s approach eschews the traditional notions of Big Band writing with its combination of woodwinds, punchy brass, Fender Rhodes and a rhythm section that embraces rock and minimalism. Clearly, here is an original voice making itself known and it is fair to say that the superior writing does dominate.

As exciting as this record is, there are a few reservations. Much of the material is very similar and only “Transit” seems to pick up the tempo from the slow /medium compositions that dominate this disc. “Transit” represents one of the stand-out tracks and is followed by “Redeye” which starts promisingly with the mixture of acoustic and electric guitar before developing into a piece convincingly written to describe the state of tiredness at which you feel you are floating. Coupled with the similarly slow-moving “Habeas Corpus”, having reached this point in the record you begin to wish for a greater range of material and a bit more variety.

The other concern is the employment of an electronic percussion instrument to drive the band and whilst this certainly grabs your attention of the opening track “Phobos” with its gently throbbing guitar riff (think of the effect of Gil Evans’ “Lunar Eclipse” on the album “Priestess” and you will get the impression) , Argue later employs this instrument throughout “Jacobin Club” with the consequence that you desperately want to hear a proper drum kit to lift this chart beyond the almost mechanical crawl.

On the plus side, the album ends very strongly with “Obsidian Flow” where the melody is picked out by an alto saxophone underpinned by a slightly menacing riff which gradually builds up in excitement. Stopping mid-way through to change tack, the remainder of the chart features the alto soloing over another vamp until developing into some impressive orchestral writing over a bass pedal. The alto soloist returns once more over the riff which grows progressively louder and ferocious providing a fitting climax to this record.

In conclusion, this is a fascinating record and demonstrative of just how exciting the potential is for modern big band writing with arrangers fully conversant with contemporary Classical techniques and fully capable of creating their own musical identity. A more varied programme would have made this one of the most interesting releases of the year but, all the same, Darcy James Argue remains a name to watch for those interested in this field of jazz. *(Ian Thumwood)*

BARNACLED – CHARLES



Label: ESP Disk

Release Date: November 2008

Tracklist: Rattles; Losing Weight Through Prayer; Jennifer Plastics; Three Rapid Fire Shell Divisions; Language Barrier; Polyurethane; Simulacrum

Personnel: Frank Difficult: electronics/keyboard; Michael Jeffries: bass/baritone saxophone/modified Speak & Spell; Jason McGill: alto saxophone/percussion/shortwave radio; Matt McLaren: drums/ percussion; Alec K. Redfearn: accordion; Ann Schattle: horn in F; Erica Schattle: bassoon

‘Charles’, an album named for the friendly faced goat which adorns its cover, finds Providence, Rhode Island septet Barnacled charting the oft-perilous waters of ‘progressive’ rock. Barnacled’s brand of prog is not, however, that of those now infamous 1970s dinosaurs whose pretentious pseudo-classical excursions made them, ironically enough, icons of musical regress. Instead the group draw on the more whimsical style associated with bands of the so-called ‘Canterbury’ scene, filtering this sensibility through members’ interests in such varied musical terrain as punk, metal, and free jazz.

Barnacled’s oddball sound is quickly established on opening track ‘Title’, which begins with an insistent chromatic line from the band’s horn section (comprising bassoon, horn in F, alto and baritone sax) which suggests a harder-edged Soft Machine circa ‘Third’. Repeated variations on the opening riff eventually give way to a spacey, ambient drone over which the saxes wrangle in free jazz fashion, before the main riff returns once again. After a solo spot for drums and accordion the riff re-emerges and drives the piece to its conclusion, backed by thunderous percussion. The track’s overall reliance on repeated riffs and a hammering backbeat suggests that, despite the occasional stylistic reference to the free jazz of ESP forebears like Albert Ayler and Sun Ra, Barnacled are at heart a ‘rock’ band – albeit an unusual one (there are no guitars, for starters).

Whilst ‘Title’ hints at the quick-fire barrage of hardcore punk and extreme metal, second track ‘Rattles’ is more openly indebted to such music, with its grinding, fuzzy bass-line and blasting drums – supplant the minor-key horn parts for tremolo-picked guitars and it could almost be black metal at certain points. The band eases up on the pace on ‘Losing Weight Through Prayer’, but retains a sense of underlying menace with the rhythm section’s uneasy groove, on top of which accordion and horns explore Eastern-tinged modal ideas: imagine Gong, but with the teapots and gnomes replaced by the monstrous beings of H. P. Lovecraft (as the liner notes astutely remind us, Lovecraft was also a native of Providence). It is these opening three tracks that best exemplify Barnacled’s darker, edgier take on the jazzy psych-rock of the Canterbury bands – whilst the humour and good-natured whimsicality remains, a clear affinity for the more angular, jarring qualities of other genres keeps any latent hippy tendencies safely in check.

Elsewhere on 'Charles' the band venture into more overtly experimental territory. 'Jennifer Plastics' for instance, is a noise piece employing electronics and radio; 'Polyurethane', meanwhile, alternates between a melodic horn refrain and whispered free improvisation in music that recalls the Spontaneous Music Ensemble. Rather perversely, these forays into 'avant-garde' music don't offer a great deal that is new or terribly exciting – certainly nothing to compete with the pioneers of such approaches. Other tracks, notably 'Three Rapid Fire Shell Divisions', find the band returning to repeated gestures, with throbbing rhythms redolent of minimalism – again, not something I find particularly thrilling, although Barnacled bring a (un)healthy sense of warped-ness to such material, making it a far cry from the sterile blandness of some minimalist fare.

Barnacled's wilfully eclectic, polymorphous sound can prove enervating at times, and the unabashed incorporation of such diverse influences sometimes threatens to turn the music into a stylistic mishmash (perhaps this was intentional; postmodernism has, after all, made pastiche an acceptable aesthetic approach – according to some). Yet, even when they don't quite get it right, Barnacled bring a sense of weirdness and daring to their music that many contemporary bands working within the broad idiom of rock-derived music lack, and for this they deserve credit. *(Daniel Larwood)*

MICHEL F. CÔTÉ/ A_DONTIGNY – LA NOTTE FA



A_Dontigny

Michel F. Côté

Label: &records

Release Date: 2008

Tracklist: Ritmi di oggetti; Unlisted Card Number; Paxil Origami Club; Bounce Dat ARN; Lube Liqueur; Jumping Off Minoru Yamasaki's Building; Visiones Noctunæ; target="blank_"; Naines qui gesticulent; The Book Burner

Personnel: [Michel F Côté](#): drums, percussion, micros, tapes, electronics; A_Dontigny: cut-ups, drum machines, dsp; Bernard Falaise: guitar on 4 & 9, keyboards on 9; Alexandre St-Onge: bass and sounds on 4 & 9; Alexander Macsween: additional drums on 1; Jean René: viola on 3

Jittery, cut-up music in which a barrage of samples – fragments of barely-recognisable speech, conventional instruments running a gauntlet of electronic distortion, snippets of grooves and beats that have been pulled and stretched and chopped to pieces – collide and (less frequently) cohere into a soundscape that can strike one at different moments as either fun, in a kind of crazy, sped-up way, or nightmarish, for pretty much the same reason. The starting point here would seem to be the more experimental moments of Autechre or Aphex Twin, with the tendency to repetitive, danceable beats knocked to one side to leave something which has a definite physical pull to it, but which isn't going to make you dance to any sort of regular rhythm– rather, your stop-start spasms will give you away as a madman dancing to the disrespectful voices in your head. There's no real question of 'soloing' here, or even of distinguishing between the various musicians, given the way that everything is mashed-up through electronics: the occasional beats which can be heard to come from a conventional drum-kit are soon overlaid with all manner of computerised sputters and run-away loops, and Jean René's viola, which might have pulled things in a more ambient direction (à la Coil's 'Moon's Milk') is kept firmly to the bottom of the mix on his one contribution to the album. It's rather like listening to a radio station with really fucked-up reception for an hour, the few moments of respite being provided through samples of Maurice Ravel's 'Ma Mere L'Oye' and a Don Cherry trumpet piece that appear, are toyed with, mangled out of recognition, and then discarded for the next set of electronic whirligigging. Another comparison might be the sample-overload of early Public Enemy without the (relatively) stabilising element of Chuck D and Flavor Flav's vocals, which are at least determinedly *about* something: no such reference points here. One is left to conclude, then, that it's best to avoid looking for comparisons, for generic references, as they're pretty much useless in describing music that's so determinedly askew, so schizophrenically active, so resistant to easy digestion and to standardised comprehension as this; music as chemical substance, hurtling through the blood-stream, sparking all sorts of strange, shuddering journeys through the brain. **(DG)**

BILL DIXON – TAPESTRIES FOR SMALL ORCHESTRA

Bill Dixon

tapestries for small orchestra

Label: Firehouse 12

Release Date: November 2009

Tracklist: (Disc One) Motorcycle '66: Reflections & Ruminations; Slivers: Sand Dance for Sophia; Phrygian II; Adagio: Slow Mauve Scribblings; (Disc Two) Allusions I; Tapestries; Durations of Permanence; Innocenza

Personnel: Bill Dixon: trumpet, electronics; Taylor Ho Bynum: cornet, flugelhorn, bass trumpet, piccolo trumpet; Graham Haynes: cornet, flugelhorn, electronics; Stephen Haynes: trumpet, cornet, flugelhorn; Rob Mazurek: cornet, electronics; Michel Conte: contrabass clarinet, bass clarinet; Glynis Loman: cello; Ken Filiano: bass, electronics; Warren Smith: vibes; marimba, drums, tympani, gongs.

Additional Information: The physical release of the album (as opposed to MP3 versions), comes with a DVD documentary covering the recording sessions, entitled 'Going to the Center'.

Bill Dixon's most recent recordings have found him working in large ensemble settings, rather than the duo and solo format which makes up much of his recorded output, and the title of his latest release announces that the sound will once more have an orchestral dimension. As Stephen Haynes notes in his online journal/blog covering the recording sessions for this project,¹ one of the challenges involved was providing enough distinction in the sound mix between five trumpeters/cornet players with similarly dark sounds. But Dixon does, after all, favour a dark palette, as amply demonstrated by his last album, '17 Musicians In Search of a Sound: Darfur', where the slightly larger ensemble produced slowly emerging chord-clouds and slowly shifting unison passages in which the ensemble mesh was produced by individual instruments in near, but not quite, total alignment. The effect is a kind of blurring, produced by a very careful manipulation of individual detail; a more horizontal than vertical approach, with solos emerging as parts of the texture – like a colour highlighted in a particular portion of a canvas – rather than as monologues supported by an ensemble background. This has always been the case with Dixon's own playing, particularly given his use of electronics, and the fact that the other trumpeters also deploy electronics, in some cases seeming to mimic his approach – muted growls, breathy whispers, repeated mid-register notes, high-pitched flurries cascading into silence – adds to the collaborative feel. That's not to say that there aren't solo spots, though – for instance, 'Motorcycle '66' starts with melodic material for unaccompanied bass which succeeds in forcing an initial concentration, in ushering the listener in to a music which needs to be heard with open ears. In any case, neither ensemble nor solo passages contain a wasted note; as Dixon puts it: "Listen to the space in the room. If you can't do something more beautiful than that, shut the fuck up." The result tends to a kind of substantial minimalism – very slow, seeming to lack any overtly linear development, predominantly atmospheric, almost trance-like. And yet even this apparent lack of activity – most pronounced on the sustained hush of 'Adagio: Slow Mauve Scribblings' – reveals itself upon closer inspection to consist of complex structural balances and connections. Low, slowly-shifting drones, shimmering vibraphone, occasional electronic tweaks, overlapping melodic lines, repeated upward flurries all combine to create a sound field that is unique in modern music. Inexorable yet fragile, 'Tapestries for Small Orchestra' is slow-moving, meditative, and deeply affecting. **(DG)**

¹ http://stephenhaynes.blogspot.com/2008_07_01_archive.html

**MARC EDWARDS/ WEASEL WALTER GROUP – MYSTERIES
BENEATH THE PLANET**

Label: ugEXPLODE

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: A World Without Sun; Luminous Predator; Book of the Dead; The Coral Reef
Personnel: (Tracks 1 & 3) Marc Edwards: drums (right channel); Weasel Walter: drums (left channel); Tom Blancarte: bass; Peter Evans: trumpet, melodica; Darius Jones: alto saxophone; Paul Flaherty: tenor saxophone; (Tracks 2 & 4) Marc Edwards: drums (right channel); Weasel Walter: drums (left channel); Andre Barker: drums; Ras Moshe: tenor saxophone, flute, etc; Mario Rechtern: soprano, alto & baritone saxophones, etc

What you get when you match up two drummers of such explosive power as Weasel Walter and Marc Edwards is a music that's volatile and loud, and the two large ensembles they work with on these four tracks unleash a kaleidoscope of textures that fly past like super-fast flashes of light. Opener 'A World without Sun' is relatively brief. Walter and Edwards begin with drum textures before Tom Blancarte's sawing, groaning-ship bass is joined by the multiphonic growls of the twin saxophones. As the full band rises from this textured opening to full-blast collectivism, Darius Jones' alto and Peter Evans' trumpet take on bouncy jazz inflections while Paul Flaherty unleashes throaty rasps on tenor. Blancarte's bass is felt as an underlying vibration as much as it is heard playing bass-lines, while Walter and Edwards rise in alternating crests so that the texture is always filled with metallic pings, rumbles and rolls. The saxophones mesh together in thick, overblown impasto, and everyone drops out until the last sound heard is the click of finger on saxophone.

'Luminous Predator' has, at first, an almost Moroccan vibe, due to the abrasive, nasal, Jajouka-flavoured piping of Mario Rechtern on soprano. Playing super-quick lines, tossing off shrieking flurries and melodic repetitions, he takes a brief solo under which the triple-drum backing of Walter, Edwards and Andrew Barker make up for the absence of a bass with a pulsating rhythm field that almost simulates an African drum choir in its self-generating propulsion. Once this launches into motion, its progress is assured, lurching and leaping under the shrill wails and scattergun blasts of Rechtern and Ras Moshe. As the music spirals higher and higher, the title seems entirely appropriate: music that is predatory in its speed and energy, grindingly intense in its timbral quality, but also somehow luminous and full of clarity in the total commitment, the sheer determination of its wailing, chattering possession.

While neither band exactly goes easy on the listener, the Evans/ Jones/ Flaherty/Blancarte line-up is in general slightly more concerned with the intertwining of melodic lines – or at least, the contrast of melodic line with more purely textural smears. This is in large part due

to the brassy clarion of Evans' trumpet in the ensemble passages, though when he actually solos on 'Book of the Dead' (seemingly with the aid of electronics) his harsh, grinding woofs, coupled with unnerving shouts and screams, lead to perhaps the shrillest passage on the entire record: the aural equivalent of white heat. Saxophones link in an unstable, see-sawing free jazz drone over arco bass and the circular motion of pounding drums: the contrast of repetition and ever-changing improvisation is nightmarish, edge-of-the-seat stuff, Evans' brief declaration of what sounds like a ballad melody a brief throwaway, rather than signaling a change of direction. Indeed, things only get more intense as the musicians start exchanging rough screams, the half-heard voices of monstrous forces mockingly mimicking the vocalised trajectories of the saxophones. If the Rechtern/Mose/Barker group is ecstatic in a joyful sense, the group we hear on 'Book of the Dead' goes to some fearful places – exhilarating but terrifying, a modern sublime.

Ras Moshe's flute imparts final track 'The Coral Reef' with a dancing delicacy: swirling loops and vocalisations, hints of the blues, mysterious exoticisms. Bagpipe drone, steadiness of looping melody, bird-flight flute. It's a nice change from the saxophone-dominated orthodoxy of free jazz, takes things further on down the route Coltrane and Sanders' were going before Coltrane died ('To Be' from 'Expression'): music that borrows from other continents without losing its pulsating original force, which gains rather than loses from the association. Rhythmic car-horn honk on baritone and tenor, shrill, to-the-heavens piping, drumming that undulates and flows rather than dictating too-simple directions through the imposition of clichéd beats. It all ends suddenly (an edit? Maybe there wasn't enough space for the whole piece on one CD). And the fact that one wants the CD to continue – wants more of the same, not less – indicates the power of this record, which is both one of the most varied and one of the most excitingly forceful free jazz albums I've heard in recent years. **(DG)**

JOEL FUTTERMAN – *TRANSITION ONE: SOLO PIANO*

Label: Self-released CD-R

Release Date: September 2009

Tracklist: Part One; Part Two; Part Three

Personnel: Joel Futterman: piano

Additional Information: Recorded May 16, 2009.

Available from www.joelfutterman.com

The information that comes with the CD-R informs us that “each track is a complete unedited first-take with no overdubs, and is in the order in which it was recorded.” From the off, then, Futterman's improvisational quick-thinking, honed by decades of practice and live experience, is in evidence, as he sprints the breadth of the keyboard's

register, his darts and dips from high to low notes often phrased with a marked jazz twist. The music at this early stage is characterised by the moving together and away of the two hands as independent units: for instance, the left hand will spin out a rhythm, however broken up and fractured by 'extra' notes (notes, that is, that do not quite conform to the pattern into which they are being slotted), while the right will fly with an apparently less controlled, more excitedly manic relish over a myriad of notes, unleashing a flurry of possibilities which unfurl at such speed that they cannot quite be taken in. Combine these two approaches and you have a great level of information density, with two or even three directions being explored at once, and at great speed. Such playing must be exhausting to keep up at full stretch for extended periods (though Futterman is well capable of doing so), and might perhaps lead to a kind of shut-down in the listener's mind – faced with such a sheer mass of sound, the prospect of attempting to organise it as it happens will prove too much, and the detail will become eradicated; an impression of *something* going on which shut out *precisely what* in a kind of generalised inattention. Of course, a similar, but more rewarding process, might be the paying of such close attention that a kind of trance-like state is reached: a total involvement with energy and rhythm, a perception of sound as pattern and movement, as an arrangement in space which involves and demands bodily participation.

On this occasion, though, Futterman doesn't seek to totally overwhelm in such a manner, and he's careful to vary the dynamics and timings of his attacks. Much of this is down to pedalling – a quick press of the sustain pedal adds a different temporal and textural dimension to a traversal of the keyboard, even if this lasts only for a moment – but also to the ability to put on the brakes, to suddenly stop mid-flight and leave the silence hanging, either as a gap to be filled by more energetics, or as the beginning of a quieter, more tonal approach.

These tonal sections which gradually creep in tend to be primarily in the jazz idiom, though one rolling mid-register section almost suggests the country-raga of Koln Concert era Keith Jarrett (but without the exaggerated melodicism). Yet the use of such material is by no means a regression to 'easier' music, a concession to the listener overwhelmed by speed, volume and dissonance. Firstly, the way that Futterman uses it, the gravitas and delicacy with which he plays it, confers on it the legitimacy of emotional necessity (i.e. in no way is its use parodic, nor does the thought of this even arise when one hears it as part of the whole performance). In fact, the music's 'in-the-momentness' is actually enhanced by the frequent returns to such material, which has the feel of a pre-structured jazz composition – even if, rather than elongated melodies or even quick refrains, what we have here are brief chordal

sketches and patterns which aren't quite fully-fledged 'compositions' as such. Particularly as the piece progresses, Futterman comes back again and again to a series of meltingly lovely 'ballad' chordal progressions, and, though he ruminates over them with loving care and attention, the pauses extended for maximum dramatic and emotional effect with the timing and grace we might associate in other fields with an actor or a dancer, there is always the sense that any moment he will break away from them into more abrasive or exploratory registers. There is then a very real sense of fragility, of the maintenance of a delicate balance, which is testament to Futterman's self-confidence and also to his ability to lay himself and the music on the line for the sake of discovery and for staying true to what must be created in that moment, the running of risks to gain what could not be gained any other way.

Why 'risk'? Well, for one thing, the contrast between the 'beauty' of jazz ballad chords and the 'drama' or 'aggression' of the 'avant-garde' material might easily create a rather facile oppositional feel, and Futterman has therefore to be alert to every nuance of every note which he plays, to ensure that none are wasted, that he neither overstates nor understates. So well does he negotiate this problem, in fact, that the relationship between the two types of material becomes symbiotic, rather than contrasting: like breathing in and breathing out, the one required before the other can take place. Thus, the ballad material affects the more dissonant runs through the way its rhythmic structure hangs over the music, in the form of a certain minute gradation in timing which I wouldn't quite call hesitancy or diminishment of boldness in attack. Rather, it's a split-second difference which nonetheless slightly alters the entire feel of what's been played. As one realizes that this chordal fragment just won't go away, the structure of the whole piece seems transformed. If it's become impossible at this stage for Futterman to play with the exuberance and unceasing rhythmic force of the opening, he also makes sure that he doesn't simply revert to playing on jazz ballad chord changes for the next twenty minutes (something which he would be very easily capable of doing very beautifully, but which present no real *challenge* in the spirit explored by the piece of the whole).

So, these two approaches do grow out of each other – the chords contain in themselves the possibility for lack of resolution, though they yearn so much for it, while the quick-paced runs can't be sustained for ever (as a fact of the physical demands they place on the pianist – *somewhere* there has to be a pause, a transition). And perhaps that explains the record's title, as well: the constant transition between these different types of playing, the weight accumulated by pauses and by changes of directions, by alternations and by alterations, by starting and stopping, pausing, slowing, accelerating, rising, falling. **(DG)**

GIGANTOMACHIA – THE NAKED FUTURE



Label: ESP Disk

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: We Binge on a Bloodthirsty God; We Boil the Raven's Skull into Gold; We Engage the Monstrous with Our Mirrors; We Fly Beneath and Above the Flux; We Sleep in a Rabbit Hole.

We Binge On a Bloodthirsty God; We Boil the Raven's Skull Into Gold

Personnel: Arrington de Dionyso: bass clarinet, contralto clarinet; Thollem McDonas: piano; John Niekrasz: drums; Gregg Skloff: amplified upright bass

Gigantomachia deliver free jazz (or free improvisation, what you will) with fantastically bad manners: it starts, it stops, it roars, it leaves inordinate long silences where it seems that the track must have come to an end, only for clarinetist de Dionysio to squeak things back into motion – an endlessly tense and teasing process which must play havoc with applause-ready club audiences, an extension of the kind of textural games Miles Davis played in his 1970s groups (in which he would cut out all but one member of the band with hand signals, so that the soloist was suddenly left totally out on their own), stretched even further than Miles himself dared. The amplified bass is played so hard that it sets off

reverberations from the snare, which can be heard as a kind of involuntary rhythmic accompaniment; the piano playing is tremendously exhilarating when at its most gleefully, wholly deranged, smashing clusters, smears of sound with no regard for subtlety in that moment, though also with an odd obsessive quality also shared by de Dionysio (for instance, playing a Latin hook for well over half of the third piece while the rest of the band dances free time around it).

It all has a sound to it which is some way very different to a lot of other free jazz bands; entirely appropriate to the new vision of ESP, it possesses all the rawness of their original 60s recordings, now the classics from which de Anysio and co. learn, rather than the boundary-pushers of the moment, but takes things even further out from the realms of jazz (which does, however, rear its head in a few piano phrases now and again, and in the occasional hints of a walking bass (which might just be auditory hallucinations after yet another stop-start assault)). Even the punk and rock musics which David Keenan mentions in his enthusiastic and wholly appropriate liner notes don't seem quite relevant; for though this music is hard and raw and aggressive as hell, it also has a sense of control and even of manipulation (perhaps down to de Dionysio's role as 'musical director', in some way spontaneously shaping these collective improvisations as the band's leader). In addition, you can rely on the band never to do the expected thing (when they do, as in the Latin vamp on the third piece, it becomes unexpected by dint of its rarity); this may in large part be due to the way drummer Niekrasz always looks to avoid the expected and tested paths there to tempt all percussionists (jazz time-keeping, punk rock emphatic mechanics, all-over Sunny-Murray sound-waves).

Special mention, too, must go to de Dionysio's instrumental prowess; while most bass clarinetists working in this area of the music have carried on from where Eric Dolphy left off, propelling themselves into ever more raucous and athletic displays, de Dionysio's playing on this disc is perhaps the most vigorous and elemental I've heard in quite a while, blaring over and egging on the collective fury of the band and, occasionally, engaging in breathy, tightrope-walk duos with Skloff's arco bass that unsettle as much as they represent any sort of 'calm'.

This, then, is a genuinely fresh recording: music with real spirit and bite, wholly inspiring and inspired. **(DG)**

ROY HARGROVE BIG BAND – *EMERGENCE*



Label: Emarcy

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Velera; Ms. Garvey, Ms. Garvey; My Funny Valentine; Mambo for Roy; Requiem; September In the Rain; Every Time We Say Goodbye; La Puerta; Roy Allan; Tschpiso; Trust.

Personnel: Roy Hargrove: leader, composer, arranger, trumpet, fluegelhorn, vocal; Frank Greene: trumpet and flugelhorn; Greg Gisbert, : trumpet and flugelhorn; Darren Barrett: trumpet and flugelhorn; Ambrose Akinmisure: trumpet and flugelhorn; Jason Jackson: trombone; Vincent Chandler: trombone; Saunders Sermons: trombone; Max Siegel: bass trombone, arranger; Bruce Williams: alto saxophone, flute; Justin Robinson: alto saxophone, flute; Norbert Stachel: tenor saxophone, flute; Keith Loftis: tenor saxophone, flute; Jason Marshall: baritone saxophone, flute, reeds; Gerald Clayton: piano, arranger; Saul Rubin: guitar; Danton Boller: bass; Montez Coleman: drums; Roberta Gambarini: vocals.

This is the first recording by Roy Hargrove's big band, which has been in existence since 1995. Over the years the trumpeter has produced an eclectic variety of records including hard bop, Latin, romantic strings and the pop-funk of RH Factor. This CD by his 19 piece big band is similarly no less wide ranging with the arrangements at times making the band sound like fellow trumpeter's Tom Harrell's orchestra on the opening "Velera" with others bring in mind such diverse groups as Charles Tolliver, Thad Jones / Mel Lewis ("Ms Garvey, Ms Garvey") or even Dizzy Gillespie on the humorous rendition of "September in the rain." There is even a nod to Chet Baker on "My funny valentine." Most of the arrangements are, in fact, by Roy Hargrove with others such as Frank Lacey (who contributes the modal workout of "Requiem") and up-and-coming pianist Gerald Clayton who is himself the son of arranger / bassist/ big band leader John.

It is probably a reasonable assessment to say that this is an extremely mainstream offering and it is fair to say that there is much on this record to please those who have grown up with more orthodox bands such as Count Basie's. Personally, I think that this is something very much in its favour for, with the obvious exception of the ballads, most of these tracks swing like crazy. I particularly like "Mambo for Roy" which builds up a formidable head of Latin steam with some nice flute and piano before coming to a conclusion with a thundering cadenza from Gerald Clayton after which the band bursts in with a loud tutti and Hargrove unleashing a tumultuous break underpinned with odd punctuations from the drums. The piece then ends with a montuno and an ensemble riff – all told this is just about the most exciting couple of minutes of music I have heard put down on record all year. Every time I hear it, it makes you want to punch the air in delight.

"September in the rain" opens with Hargrove's muted trumpet and sound very much like it was written in the 1950's. The leader sings on this track after of good deal of your typical big band fair and the band respond in kind to Hargrove's efforts in scat in the album's most fun track. Dizzy would have approved. Although Hargrove may not be amongst the best of his fellow trumpeters in handling the vocals, a proper singer is fortunately on hand in the form of the wonderful Italian vocalist Roberta Gambarini who delivers an impressive "Every time we say goodbye" backed by Saul Rubin's gentle chart that intriguingly mutates into $\frac{3}{4}$ halfway through. This one track offers ample proof as to why some critics in the States are considering her to be even more technically accomplished than Ella Fitzgerald. I would have to agree with this consensus. This vocal performance is perfection. However, her second feature "La Puerta" which recalls the nostalgic music of the Buena Vista Social Club albeit with considerably more bite and snap is even better and another highlight on this album.

“Roy Allan” offers another approach to Latin music but this time refracted very much through a contemporary jazz lens and features the aforementioned Mr. Rubin’s Wes Montgomery influenced guitar. There is some terrific unaccompanied section work in this Hargrove chart where the level of energy that is built up is pretty staggering. The following “Tschpiso” again pushes the music into a more contemporary feel and concludes with a riff that culminates in yet another exciting crescendo before returning to the main theme. Again, this chart is not too dissimilar to the kind of music played by Tom Harrell albeit several notches higher in the excitement stakes. The album concludes with the gentle “Trust.”

All told, it is difficult to reign in my enthusiasm for this record. The music is very varied, there are some brilliant solos and the band creates much genuine excitement as opposed to simply running down some charts in the studio. This is a record that seems to get better and better with every listen. I think the band is terrific and the arrangements offer a contrasting programme that will appeal to most tastes. On top of this, the appearance of Roberta Gambarini is the icing on the cake. So far, this is the best new CD of 2009 in my opinion. I can’t recommend “Emergence” strongly enough. **(Ian Thumwood)**

VIVIANE HOULE – TREIZE



Label: Drip Audio

Release Date: October 2009

Tracklist: Mandrake; Molehills Mumps; Paperthin; Gratte-Moi Le Dos; Quiet Eyes; It's Not the Moon; Betters and Bads; Finely Tuned is My Heart; Au Revas; A Little Storm; Bells Hung in a Tree; Song not for You; Curve

Personnel: Viviane Houle: vocals and texts, with; Peggy Lee: cello (1); Lisa Miller: piano (2); Coat Cooke: saxophone (3); Kenton Loewen: drums (4); Ron Samworth: guitar (5); Chris Gestrin: analog keyboards and live sampling (6); Jesse Zubot: violin (7); Jeremy Berkman: trombone (8); Paul Plimley: piano (9); Jeff Younger: guitar (10); Clyde Reed: bass (11); Brent Belke: guitar (12); Stefan Sumlovitz: kenaxis (13)

I suppose I would say that Houle's voice, like the voices of Phil Minton and Maggie Nicols, is essentially dramatic, in contrast to Ute Wassermann or Ami Yoshida, whose voices undoubtedly have an impact intense enough to be called 'dramatic', but whose concern seems primarily textural. Nonetheless, she combines elements of the latter approach as well; given that she duets with such a wide range of musicians and instruments on the album, an ability for textural adaptation is a must. Generally, she stays away from anything resembling conventional song mode, preferring to unleash hag cackles, wordless, sung-spoken parodies of dialogue, and stretched moans from the back of the throat. When she's paired with a musician who adopts a similar approach – focussing in on a particular range of sonic details, using 'non-standard techniques' – such a style comes across at both its most rigorous and its most disturbing/ emotionally arresting. For instance: the opening piece, with cellist Peggy Lee, where the 'song-like' cello sings out in a much more forceful and less elegant way than one might expect from classical repertoire, or the fourth track, where drummer Kenton Loewen begins with high-pitched scrapes that treat his kit as texture rather than rhythm (as on Sean Meehan's duo album with Sachiko M), before picking up on a nervous, insect-like quality to Houle's vocals as they dance *round*, rather than *in*, rhythm.

A few of the tracks have 'lyrics', sometimes quietly spoken as poetry, sometimes delivered as a kind of improvised, sung meditation with an inward-looking, melancholic quality to it like a less jazzy version of Patty Waters (the eleventh track, with Clyde Reed's acoustic bass). Houle's voice is also treated with echo and some other electronic means (as on the final, dark ambient style track); I'm not sure whether these were live effects or added at the post-production stage, and, in any case, it doesn't really matter, as they provide an atmospheric quality without dominating at the expense of musical interaction.

In some ways, this album might have come across as something of a showcase – it is, after all, a debut, and Houle could be forgiven for showing off what she can do with her voice. Another danger might have been a lack of unity, given the variety of accompanists. I'm pleased to

report, though, that both traps are successfully negotiated: there is variety, and Houle does do a lot of different things with her voice, but there's also a careful, if lop-sided sense of 'plot' to the record (a plot dictated more by the ever-changing emotional response to stimuli than by any mechanical imposition). Juxtapositions between tracks are sometimes so seamless that one can barely tell one track has ended and another begun, and sometimes audaciously abrasive and noticeable— as when the quiet, jazz-tinged duet with Clyde Reed gives way to Brent Belke's grungy avant-rock guitar and Houle comes out screaming. All in all, it's a fine piece of work from an artist clearly dedicated to free improvisation, but also willing, in a manner that's not at all self-conscious or superficial, to embrace the sounds of other genres: jazz, rock, ambient, electronic. **(DG)**

ANNETE KREBS/ TOSHIMARU NAKAMURA – SIYU

Label: SoSeditions **Release Date:** 2008 **Tracklist:** Wrr; Bsb

Personnel: Annette Krebs: guitar, mixing board, tapes, objects;
Toshimaru Nakamura: no-input mixing board

Of the two musicians, Krebs produces the greater variety of textures (scrunches, clicks, klangs, percussion, fragments of speed-up tape, radio static), but the fading and swelling of Nakamura's unadorned sine tones is essential in creating the dynamics of the music, organising and shaping the sound. What emerges is not, like a sculpture, something you can step back and see as a whole, but an ongoing construction which creates itself anew each time it is played; a series of fortunate events, each melding into the next so you'd be hard-pressed to say where one ended and another began. Here we have mastery of transition¹ – though that phrase implies a more nicely, precisely ordered structural edifice than 'Siyu' offers. Such structure is simply not what the listener's ear will experience when faced with fifty minutes of very high sine tones and spluttering, splitting, flickering rhythm and crackle. Even the tape fragments of disembodied human voice become alien, in this, the electronic world's intrusion into the comfort zone. Yet no more alien than a society technologized for war, at all costs intending to further brute instincts even if under veneers of 'growth', 'progress', 'sophistication', the 'organic' flow of oil and blood and armed men in coffins, pipelines, streets, screens, screams.

This alien voices *the new song* then, both as antidote to and as part of the problem; both the balm and the wound, to be heard, to be healed. In Krebs' hands and in Nakamura's hands music-making

¹ I use words like *Event*, *Transition*; maybe, however, it would be better to talk about overlapping *spheres of activity* (*spheres* might also be the form taken by the shapes in sound that Nakamura makes, if they were translated visually).

becomes an *act*, involving listening, being, reacting. That's more music to me than what is well-executed (executed with the clean, swift blow of the axe – without a hint of rust, or of the blood that's swept away (death without the body; the blank neatness of the controlled ending)). Of course, in its own realm, 'Siyu' is supremely well-executed (what-ever 'well' means.) Here, then, is what this well springs. **(DG)**

THE PEGGY LEE BAND – NEW CODE



Label: Drip Audio

Release Date: 2008

Tracklisting: All I Really Want to Do; Preparations; Offshoot 1; Not a Wake Up Call; Floating Island; Offshoot 2; Scribble Town; Tug; Offshoot 3; Walk Me Through; Shifting Tide; Lost in the Stars

Personnel: Brad Turner: trumpet, flugelhorn; Jon Bentley: tenor saxophone; Jeremy Berkman: trombone; Peggy Lee: cello; Ron Samworth, Tony Wilson: electric and acoustic guitars; Andre Lachance: electric bass; Dylan van der Schyff: drums

Not exactly free jazz (though there are three freely improvised pieces), this 2008 release is similar to the Tony Wilson Sextet's 'The People Look Like Flowers At Last' (another all-Canadian album released

on Drip Audio), in that its carefully structured arrangements, directed towards emotional climaxes, leave plenty of space for improvisation. Indeed, the compositional aspect isn't 'restrictive' in the slightest; richly harmonized melodies give way to sections where it's the responsibility of the individual players to sustain and expand on the texture that's been established, while emphatic rhythms and repetitive riffs provide the transitional anchor between 'themes' and 'solos', so that things never feel merely schematic ('we've played the head now, let's get on and blow').

A record of original compositions by band-leader Peggy Lee, and improvisations by various members of the group, 'New Code' opens and closes with pieces representative of its general intentions. Bob Dylan's 'All I Want to Do' comes across as joyfully bubbling and flowing; the simple melody isn't altered too much, though some rather nifty voicings for the horns and a nice little countermelody bolster it up a little, but once the solos come in, volumes rise and textures thicken, with high scribbling cello, babbling trumpet, wailing trombone and guitars that suddenly vault from the brink of atonality into a country-flavoured riff that smoothly ushers in the fade back to the original melody. The show-tune melody of Kurt Weill's 'Lost in the Stars', meanwhile, is treated with what at first seems like a rather undue reverence; as the track builds, though, and the melody repeats in hymn-like unison over Dylan van der Schyff's ecstatically crashing drums, it's clear both that such reverence is not misplaced, and also that it's not really reverence. Rather, it's a confidence in treating pre-existing compositional material with an improvisational freshness and verve, while maintaining a keen sense of ensemble arrangement and an ever-present clarity of structure. The effect in this particular instance is a little similar to Otomo Yoshihide's 'Theme from Canary', though it doesn't build to quite such splendidly passionate heights (partly given that it's so much shorter: most of the tracks on this record don't average much more than five minutes each).

Both the Dylan and the Weill, then, are testament to this band's fine sense of climax, their ability to imperceptibly switch gears and build up a fine head of steam from originally quiet foundations. Elsewhere, the process is reversed, as they transition smoothly (via a frantic fading loop) from the noisy, snarling fuzz guitar solo of 'Not a Wake Up Call' to the harmonically ambiguous but serene guitar riff which lies under the swooning and rather sad horn melodies of 'Fading Island'.

'Preparations' follows the opening Dylan cover, and is, at nearly nine minutes, the longest track on the album. After a rather hesitant improvised opening, which sounds rather like treading water until the 'track proper' gets under way, a simple three-note melody (very similar to one which appears on the recent album by one of the guitarists on this

date, Tony Wilson) allows the band to build up a great head of steam. With space to stretch out, their playing has a passionate flow which characterizes the disc – Lee’s cello threads its way through trumpet, saxophone and trombone melodies and countermelodies, Dylan van der Schyff egging everyone on with cymbal flourishes, rolls and crashes. Some unexpected but delightful Gil Evans-flavoured thematic material closes the piece in fine ‘Sketches of Spain’ fashion.

The first of three ‘Offshoots’ – short improvisations for smaller groupings of the various band members – is a good opportunity to hear Jeremy Berkman’s woozily smeared trombone, as part of a prickly texture created by Ron Samworth’s hard-edged plucking and grinding and van der Schyff’s steel-jawed repetitions. ‘Not a Wake Up Call’ and ‘Floating Island’ I’ve already discussed, and they are perhaps the disc highlights. Another ‘Offshoot’ finds the duo of Lee and trumpeter Brad Turner opening with subdued complementary melodic lines; as these naturally spiral into denser and then more broken realms, Lee abandons smooth arco playing for crackling, physically immediate plucking and strumming approach that puts me in mind of Abdul Wadud’s fine solo recording from, ‘By Myself.’ ‘Scribble Town’ sets out its intentions from the outset, with brutal twin guitar under a melody whose constant repetitions drive things to panic in a manner which would make Bernard Hermann proud. It’s a panic which possesses Jon Bentley’s tenor sax as he takes the track’s only solo, lingering on a high register melody as if to resist it only to throw himself back into tonguing, multiphonics and sped-up jazz frenzies. The emotional atmosphere remains fraught on ‘Tug’ (it strikes me that Lee could write a fine film-noir score if she so desired); as if to arrest this, a secondary rhythmic figure becomes the primary focus, allowing Brad Turner to lay down a rather more mellow jazz solo over less distorted guitars, with Lee’s held notes easing out behind. The original melody returns, things fading out in a way that prepares ground for the third and final ‘Offshoot’, where Bentley’s almost Evan-Parker-like saxophone engages in inquisitive melodic bursts that are at first quietly melodic and gradually wind down to a more hushed uncertainty, complemented by Lachance’s unobtrusive prodding and Wilson’s high-pitched crackles. ‘Walk Me Through’ finds Lee solo for the first time, bowing sweet, Oriental-style high notes which continue to sing out as Brad Turner guides the slowly unfolding melody along its way, over a quietly insistent background riff. ‘Shifting Tide’ again builds slowly, Bentley’s initial melodic probes falling into a suggestion of John Coltrane’s ‘Welcome’ but quickly shying away and treading a subdued rhapsodic path, full of soft tongued flurries, over another texture which gradually builds in rhythmic insistence and volume. And then the reverent serenity of the previously discussed Kurt Weill piece, to close what is a very satisfying album. **(DG)**

DAVE MERSON HESS – MUSIC FROM THE FILM ‘PRESENCE’



Label: Headphonica

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Onomatopoeia; Didn't Used to Be This Way; I Like Dogs; What is Its Vessel?; Blur and Bleed; Haunted Kid; Like Dominoes; Friends...Home; Subway Sleep; Fishmerna; Love Theme Intro; Love Theme; Static/Headtrop/Tinkly Piano; Drive; Caught in a Fingerprint; Presence Theme; Drive Outtake

Personnel: Dave Merson-Hess: Mellotron, Moog and other analog synthesizers, VST emulations, organ drones, vibraphone, heavily delayed drums, and electric guitar

The experience of listening to a film soundtrack tends to be one that falls slightly outside the usual remit, as what one hears follows the logic of what unfolds on screen rather than considerations relating to the organisation and development of a record. Thus, we hear the same theme, or themes, recurring throughout, in different arrangements, from different angles; the actual amount of original melodic material is quite slight, with much of the music's complexity occurring through the intricacy and variety of the variations spun upon it. In the case of Dave Merson-Hess' score for the independent sci-fi/horror movie 'Presence', even strong and definable melody as such is not the main criterion; rather, I'm reminded of Brian Eno's comment that texture and

atmosphere now takes predominance over melody in contemporary pop music. The cues here are driven along by various beats which provide a sense of forward-momentum, while also underlining a sense of essential stasis, of going round in circles, that resembles the trapped situation of the film's lone protagonist. Time as an important theme is introduced in the opening number, 'Onomatopeia', where what sounds like an electronic version of a speeded-up heartbeat combines with sounds that evoke sirens and the low, throbbing hum of engines in an eerie blurring of the human and the machine. The track sounds purposeful –given that we associate a pulse with the ongoing 'presence' of life, and think of machines as fulfilling some sort of continuing purpose – but is actually going nowhere, the siren sounds continuing onto the next piece as if it were all part of the same continuum. A sense of dread hovers over most of the tracks – most palpably on the grinding electric guitars of 'Drive', but even on the 'Love Theme', in which electronic organ sounds and throbbing electronics seem stuck in a minimalist loop that soon fades into a whirr of ghost-voiced static. This is then, in many ways, a bleak listen, the open-ended nature of its sounds reflecting the empty spaces and slow-paced, dream-like quality of the film it accompanies: spaced-out and often rather melancholy (the final two tracks in particular), its purpose is to underline a certain set of moods rather than to set a definite direction. Even if one hasn't seen the film, the images triggered in one's head will make a movie of their own, full of the images and only half-registered thoughts that drift around one's head in those uncertain, semi-conscious moments before sleep. **(DG)**

MIMESYS – MIMESYS

Label: Deadalus Records

Release Date: December 2006

Tracklist: mimesys 1-8

Personnel: Ugo Boscain: alto and contrabass clarinet; Michele Spanghero: double bass

Here we have a disc of mesmerizing duo improvisations by double-bassist Michele Spanghero and contra-bass clarinetist Ugo Boscain. Rather than the woody, sonorous darkness of the Eric Dolphy/Richard Davis duets, what we often hear is the sound of two instruments being pushed above their 'normal' range, howling clarinet and wrenching bass harmonics swirling and echoing round each other in continuous eddies or almost static, hovering suspensions. The effect is particularly eerie on the seventh track, Boscain's high multiphonics and deep quacks combining with Spanghero's slow bowing motions to mess with one's perception of sound-space in a way that normally only electronic music can. There's also a lovely moment five minutes into the second track where Spanghero starts to tentatively pluck out a jazzy melody reminiscent of 'It Don't Mean a Thing if it ain't got that Swing' before

things imperceptibly sweep up to hoarse clarinet barks and rasping repeated arco bass figures. It's not exactly a moment of light relief or even of particular contrast (it's a very brief moment of idiomatic playing), but, by standing out as it does, it illustrates just how focused these two musicians are on a particular area of sonic enquiry – not that their music is by any means monochromatic, but that it lulls and troubles into a state of meditation where the heart beats slower, the breathing becomes more measured, the mind at once more active in its perceptions of minute details and more restful in its focus on a specific activity and ambience. **(DG)**

JOE MORRIS – COLORFIELD



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: 2009

Tracklisting: Transparent; Silver Sun; Purple Distant; Blue Orange Curves

Personnel: Joe Morris: guitar; Steve Lantner: piano; Luther Gray: drums

Joe Morris' latest is an improvised trio recording, and the line-up (guitar, piano, drums), combined with Morris' known proclivities towards a clean guitar tone and a linear (melodic) approach, suggest that we might expect some 'chamber jazz.' In some ways this would be right; the music, though by no means harmonically straight-forward or changes based, is not biting atonal, and the textures are characterized by an

absence of the harsh sonorities often associated with 'free' guitar playing. Yet 'chamber jazz' also suggests a certain 'politeness' – or, at least, an unruffled professionalism which might be used to describe Morris' approach with some accuracy (perhaps by those less disposed to admire his work). However, this does it a disservice; the music by no means lacks inquisitiveness and a sense of exploration, and, indeed, the trio's approach leads them to wider areas and greater discoveries than a more simplistic feed-back drenched approach would. 'Colorfield' is all about the notes that are played, about having something to say when you play, about avoiding meandering and smearing, about building up an overall texture from the interaction of small details.

Lantner and Morris really exploit the overlap between guitar and piano, the melodic reflexes of both players so finely tuned that at certain points their lines intersect and overlap in a way which makes them quite hard to tell apart; a relationship in which both pursue independent courses, but in which both are heading in the same general direction. Perhaps that metaphor's too goal-oriented; rather, they take different lines for walks along the same course, no matter where they end up.

Morris' liner notes say it's melodic playing that's emphasized, and that's true; but this doesn't conflict with the 'colorfield' metaphor, as the closeness of melodic interaction creates a collective feel. If, at a certain point, Morris plays around with figures that come across like skew-wiff jazz comping, or if Lantner retreats into the background somewhat at certain points, generally the feel is not of accompaniment but of togetherness. (This may be partly due to the fact that the trio is what would be described as a 'rhythm section,' in orthodox jazz terminology – there's no saxophonist or trumpeter to automatically impose themselves into a lead role.)

Luther Gray's drums in that sense are the closest to being the odd one out, as they can't exploit the same harmonic resources and colouristic palette of guitar and piano; so he tends to keep things tight, restricted, avoiding the free drummer's usual reliance on cymbals for more tapping, a more tautly rhythmic approach. This can be heard most explicitly on the brief drum solos he takes on the final two tracks, where he explores small areas of rhythmic and timbral detail to an effect that's not exactly hypnotic but is deeply absorbing.

Tempos are generally fast, but not super-fast, high energy, free jazz style; the penultimate track is the slowest, opening with Lantner's vaguely Messiaen-flavoured piano chords, and gradually extrapolating from their in-built intensity, while the concluding piece is the fastest, Lantner playing clusters and runs at the beginning in a way which

makes one realize how subtly melodic his playing has been elsewhere, how his clusters are unobtrusive and played with a mind towards harmonic openness and detail, rather than a generalized splash. As ever with Morris, then, this is serious music, concentrated and worthy of repeated listenings. **(DG)**

PROFOUND SOUND TRIO – OPUS DE LIFE



Label: Porter Records

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: This Way, Please; Call Paul; Whirligging; Beyond; Futurity

Personnel: Andrew Cyrille: drums; Paul Dunmall: tenor sax, bagpipes; Henry Grimes: bass, violin

Additional Information: Recorded in concert at the Vision Festival, June 14th 2008.

‘Opus de Life’ might be translated as ‘Life’s Work’, and as such implies that this music is some sort of summation of the lives’ work of each of these three vastly experienced musicians. This might seem to be rather a cliché; in fact, though, it is more than this, for it actually it tells us something about the music itself, and the attitude that goes into its creation. There is a balance between the notion of ‘work’ (opus) and the notion of ‘playing’: the joy of spontaneous discovery and the ability to move wherever one pleases is coupled to the sense of responsibility imparted by making a music that is “as serious as your life,” that is *work* in a real sense, that is *doing* something for a purpose, as a contribution to a human situation (while at the same time escaping the checklist-ticking attitude that ensnares human creativity and the ability to grow and develop in the world). The musicians *play their lives* as well as just

playing music; and they also play the lives of all those who have contributed to the growth of jazz as an art form, as a mode of creative expression.

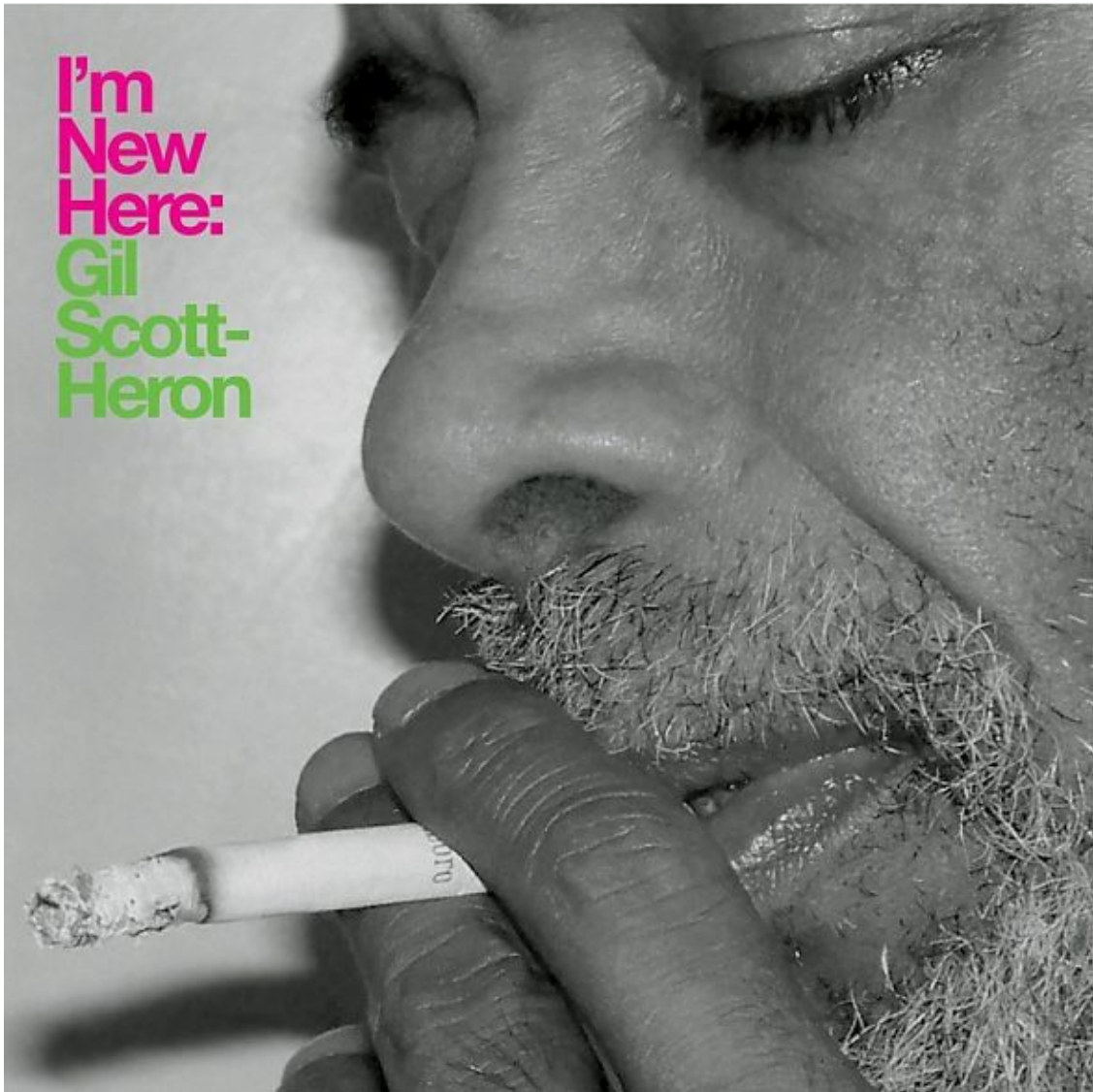
Because of this, we can say with Charles Mingus that, “if you want to escape reality, you better leave” before the musicians start playing.¹ Every time that Cyrille, Dunmall and Grimes play, they play the material that shapes their lives both at that moment and in all the moments that led up to it, that shaped them and that shaped their music. Perhaps too, as well as encapsulating past and present in a succession of unfolding flows of sounds and ideas, their music hints at future potential, future development – not only in the sense that the Profound Sound Trio will go on to play another gig, and that each individual musician will play again in any number of different contexts, and not only in the sense that the recording of the performance will be listened to in many places and situations around the world, that in this vast network many lives will be touched; not only all these things, but also that the interactions occurring here demonstrate a kind of human relation which, god knows, we need more of in this world. Co-operation, sensitivity, judging what one does in relation to how it impacts on others, participating in a collective texture which incorporates individual lines of argument, sometimes perfectly complementary, sometimes apparently divergent, creating out of the interaction of three musical personalities a fourth entity, a music with a life of its own.

What exactly is the content of a music with such attributes? Dunmall is clearly coming out of the post-Coltrane tradition; he blows hard and fast, but with sensitivity, going with the flow of the music, dropping in and out, leaving space and letting new sections develop from the old. At one point his tone is so raspily harsh that the audience is driven on to spontaneous cheers – though, despite the frequent assertion that free jazz is an ‘angry music’, what comes out above all from this recording is the sense of joy, exhilaration, of life force and life work that goes into and comes out of playing. Cyrille never feels like he is giving a drum masterclass or display, never feels like he is showing off; by reducing volume and concentrating on just a few items of his kit at certain points, he gives a breathing space in the texture for different timbres, different sounds to be heard. Grimes, meanwhile, combines his unflagging energy on the bass with a wonderfully free, folk-influenced style on violin that is an entirely new sound in the jazz world. Particularly when combined with Dunmall’s bagpipes, we are lifted into an entirely new and surprising space, where elements of the dance emerge in what the track title accurately describes as ‘Whirligging’ – a kind of perpetual motion, a spinning intertwining of voices and rhythms,

¹ Thanks to Joel Futterman for providing me with this quotation.

spiralling arcs of melody climbing over and under each other. The captivating nature of such joyous and often frenetic forms spurs on the audience to become a participant in the music, not just a passive recipient of it; when they clap after a solo or a particularly impressive passage, this is not just the automatic response triggered by the concert situation (as it might be on a classical recording), but an actual outpouring of thanks and appreciation for the way the music has moved them. **(DG)**

GIL SCOTT-HERON – *I'M NEW HERE*



Label: XL Recordings

Release Date: February 2010

Tracklist: On Coming From a Broken Home (Part 1); Me And The Devil; I'm New Here; Your Soul And Mine; Parents (Interlude); I'll Take Care Of You; Being Blessed

(Interlude); Where Did The Night Go; I Was Guided (Interlude); New York Is Killing Me; Certain Things (Interlude); Running; The Crutch; I've Been Me (Interlude); On Coming From a Broken Home (Part 2)

Personnel: Gil Scott-Heron: vocals; Damon Albarn: keyboards (track 2); Pat Sullivan: acoustic guitar (track 3); Christiana Liberis, Mary Jo Stilp, Mike Block, Una Tone: strings (tracks 4, 6, 13); Kim Jordan: piano (track 6), additional vocals (track 10); Michelle Hutcherson, Tiona Hall, Tyria Stokes: background vocals (track 10); Chris Cunningham: guitar, synthesizer (track 10); Richard Russell: production
Gil Scott-Heron: vocals; Pat Sullivan: acoustic guitar; Richard Russell: production

Let's not talk about the release of this new album as an 'event', if we can help it. Yes, Gil Scott-Heron, 'godfather of rap', a hugely important voice in bringing socially-conscious messages to both black and white youth, has not recorded an album since 1994's 'Spirits'. Yes, he has been in and out of prison, has had plans for recordings and for books planned and then postponed, has made intermittent public appearances but been generally been shrouded in rumours of ill-health and personal breakdown. Yes, all this has happened – and the record's title suggests a very specific engagement with the notion that Heron is a quote-unquote major artist who must add to his legacy, must teach us all once again, must justify his absence with another classic. Might it suggest that Heron is a new man, reborn, coming out of hard times with his head held high once more? And would that mean a return to the Heron of the old days, or would it mean a re-invented, re-energized artist, starting over just as strong but in a different place?

These are all questions that Heron does not *need* to answer: he has done enough, whatever the critics may say about missed opportunities, not to have to make another statement if he does not wish to; his position is assured. But, as listeners, as critics, we cannot help but make them – we cannot pretend to listen in a vacuum. And so the comparisons begin almost as soon as we press play.

First off, after we get past the spoken-word of the opening track, we'll notice that Heron sounds less comfortable singing now (perhaps explaining the choice of Smog's neo-folk acoustic number 'I'm New Here' to cover; in the original, Bill Callahan's sung voice was always on the brink of shading over into laconic, spoken reflection, and here, Heron speaks most of the words, singing only the short, recurring chorus). His voice is now partially possessed of the 'lived-in' croak that characterises latter-day Dylan and Tom Waits. Though that has always been part of Waits' cigarettes-and-alcohol mystique, and seems to have become an accentuation of Dylan's famously less than smooth vocal stylings (albeit one so extreme that its burden must be borne by his status as a 'living legend' fondly canonised by both a generation of fading hippies and Professor Christopher Ricks), in Heron's case, as his voice *was* quite mellifluous before, this may have necessitated a stylistic change, as it

can't quite carry the righteous soul style. (It will be interesting to hear what material Heron tackles in his upcoming live shows – one would have thought that a record like this wouldn't really be feasible as a stage show, and a return to the jazz/soul instrumental styling would seem likely.)

But, given all this, one must remember that spoken word is how Heron started off in the first place – his debut record announced him as 'A New Black Poet', and it is as poet as much as singer that he appears here. Despite the apparently low-key title of that record ('Small-Talk at 125th and Lenox'), the wide-ranging subject matter and the urgent desire to speak political realities meant that he was soon aligned with the poet-teachers of the 1970s African-American urban experience: June Jordan, Jayne Cortez, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Father Amde Hamilton, Otis O'Solomon, Richard Dedeaux, Jalal Mansur Nuriddin, Abiodun Oyewole, Umar Bin Hassan. Of course, such a reduction – to a list of names – would mitigate the approach that all these artists shared, one that was about 'the revolution of everyday life', rather than about soapbox sermonising or political platitudinising divorced from the thoughts and feelings, the insults and injuries, the imposed or unwitting failures, and, yes too, the joys that occupied every minute of every day for vast numbers of ordinary people. Thus, while all the reviews will focus on the fact that 'I'm New Here' is a 'personal' record, a chastened Heron's reaction to years of silence through addiction and imprisonment, it's worth noting that the material which made his name was precisely defined by its absence of sloganeering (this is the narrative of 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' – moving revolution, as a movement, away from the simplicity of oft-repeated clichés, catchphrases, and images), and by its focus on the inseparability of the personal and the political (think of the way the narrative of black poverty and institutional callousness in 'Pieces of a Man' is filtered through a sentiment of personal and private grief). Nonetheless, while Heron, particularly as time went on, did take on the position of spokesman (shouting out against the Reagan era, then advising the hip-hop artists who followed in his wake to take more account of their social responsibility, as potential teachers of, and voices for their generation), his absence from the scene perhaps mitigates against his effectiveness as the wise elder – having passed on the mantle, he can self-reflect, in a manner of course still tied to the forces that shaped him, but with the specifics of political concern not voiced *explicitly*.

Instead, what seems a more imaginatively exaggerated world emerges. This may result as much as anything from the ominous sound of the music: its samples and murmurs, its hisses and whirrs are a world away from the soul-drenched piano chords and jazz bass of the more

familiar work, though the references to Charon and to Satan, and the flickering, high speed urban ghosts of the video to 'Me and the Devil' certainly have their say in the matter too. Given further reflection, however, one realises that the words frequently turn on themes familiar enough to count as archetypal. The personal demons of alcohol-fuelled sleeplessness and the drudge of routine ('Where Did the Night Go') form a quieter, more intimate variation on 'The Bottle', while, elsewhere, it is the classic themes of the blues that are returned to: the old theme of urban decay as contrasted against the simplicity of a poor, but perhaps more 'honest', rural past ('New York is Killing Me'), the attractive yet unsettling force of the supernatural ('Me and the Devil') – where the supernatural becomes a potent force, not so much structured into simple moral schemes but figured as part of the complexity of human behaviour, and – crucially – part of the complexity of the traditions formed over centuries by African-Americans reacting to their transplantation and subsequent isolation in 'the land of the free'.

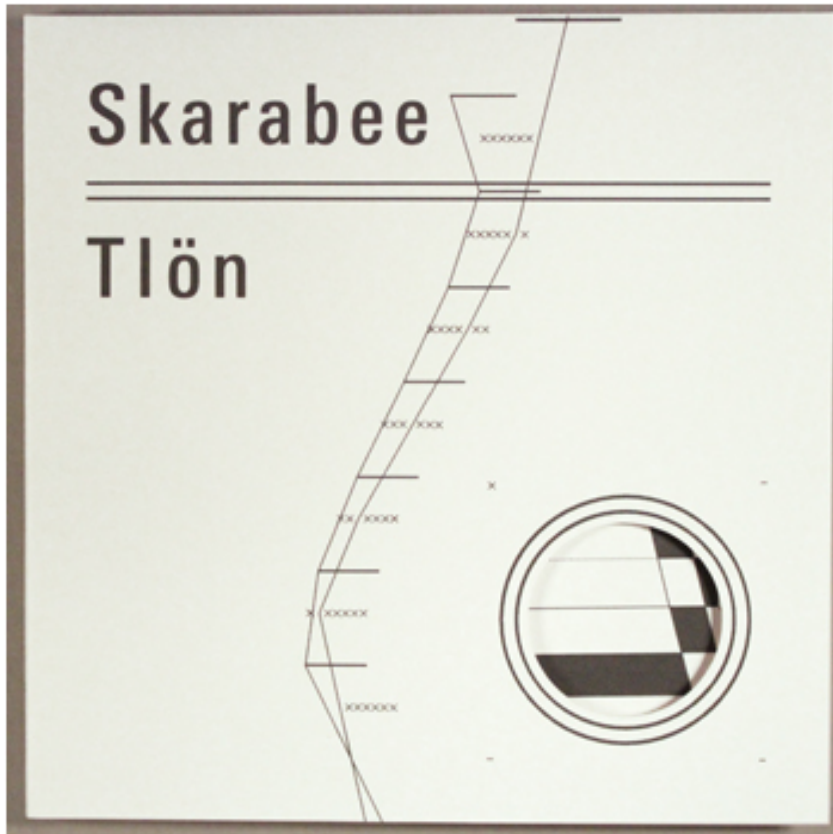
Transformation is a major part of this experience – the practice of 'signifying' – jazz's transformation of white instruments through black music – Sun Ra's transformation of a multitude of subjects, from spirituals to space travel – Ray Charles' transformation of gospel styles from the sacred to the profane – Heron's non-televised transformation of the slogans of consumer culture into their negation. And 'I'm New Here', too, is about transformation – two of the stand-out tracks are covers, back to the roots with Robert Johnson's 'Me and the Devil', and, more surprisingly, turning to acoustic guitar and the (musically) lilting, (lyrically) self-interrogating 'I'm New Here' by Bill Calahan (a.k.a. Smog). Connecting the subdued, whimsical delicacy of white folk-tradition in the latter, with the blues' more extrovert, dramatically strident position doesn't so much seal their differences as emphasise the common thread of vulnerability and personal honesty underlining both – as well as the fact that such apparent straightforwardness is always an assuming of a role, a self-dramatisation that stands, often ambiguously, for a truth, rather than presenting that truth direct in itself. This is a balance between frailty and strutting confidence that the record treats as central. It doesn't shy away from the increased weakness of Heron's voice; rather, the production takes account of it, even foregrounds it – rather than compensating with a thicker background texture, it keeps things sparse and stripped-down, to emphasize rather than to hide.

This turns out to mean that we have here a striking generic difference to previous Scott-Heron albums. The aforementioned production is decidedly lo-fi (with tape hiss and sparing use of murky samples), and its semi-industrial sound owes much to the spaciousness, to the minimal, almost empty ghost-traces of dub-step, where samples

drift in and out almost un-noticed, where tracks float along on skeletal beats that pound with mechanical precision but that never feel fast or driving. There are no saxophone, flute or piano solos to add more complex improvised variations over the song's basic structures; instead, there are the pauses between phrases, the tension hanging on each word, the wait for each weighted-syllable.

And, given that the fifteen-track record lasts for only 28-minutes (including a number of 'interludes' – 10-second, reverb'd snippets of Heron in conversation), each syllable is most definitely weighted. Such brevity makes it important to experience the whole thing as one, continuous, flowing entity: the recurring Kanye West sample which opens and closes the record, giving it an element of circularity; the transference of mood from tales of spirits and the threat of damnation ('Me and the Devil', 'Your Soul and Mine') to personal ruminations hung-over with depression and unease ('Where Did the Night Go', 'Running'), to warmer reminiscences and reflections on a life – the way it was lived, the influences that shaped it (the spoken-word snippets). Though the songs themselves generally have a clear and simple structure, the predominance of spoken word and the sparseness of the background mean that tracks don't split as easily into single entities as they do on, say, 'Pieces of a Man'. Because of this, some might slant this as a record of half-started (or half-finished) demos and sketches, spliced together and put out there before it's reached the stage of a rounded, completed artistic statement. Indeed, the quick-fix critic in me suggested that very angle when I first heard these tracks, but, in trying to actually listen to and experience the album with an open attitude, I realised that trying to impose such a structure would not be to take this record on its own terms – which is the only way it is going to make sense. Forget pre-conditioned ideas about how an album 'should' be constituted – as much as you can – and, allowing that the distance of time may allow a more finely-balanced judgement once a few years have passed, I think one can say that this *is* a good piece of work: sincere, not bombastic, not expected; unsentimental but frank, not directed towards melody as on the classic albums but with enough melodic aftertaste to satisfy. And in that sense, assessment as to whether it is a 'major album' or an 'important comeback', and attempts to place it into a particular model of 'late recordings by former legends' (all the Johnny Cash comparisons we've been hearing), come to seem rather unnecessary, rather out of place. You can hear it for what it is, and *you should*. **(DG)**

SKARABEE – TLÖN



Label: fbox records

Release Date: 2009

Tracklisting: conversing spirits; lunar landscapes; rewinding metals; insect swarming; talking in code; scratched surface; machine ghosts

Personnel: Stuart Chalmers: karimba, electronics, contact mic, bows and household objects

'Tlön' is packaged with an aesthetic that, while pleasingly minimalist, stays on the right side of mere decoration, of the mere rehashing of a marketable aesthetic; it has a certain edge to it, not succumbing to any overweening conceptual programme, but with enough 'content' to it to give the impression of more than a mere exercise in form or atmosphere. It's rather like a puzzle that doesn't quite work: the way the cardboard folds out leads to expectations of a map or a poster appearing if one arranges things the right way, only for the operation to become impossible just a few stages before the promised unravelling. Dig the porthole on the cover, the inscrutable marks purporting to mean something but in the end simply just *there*, elegant straight lines curving upwards leg-like, small x's giving the appearance of a diagram, fragments of photographs and black and white shapes suggesting some realm of greater activity that lurks behind the smooth cream cardboard.

The music is similarly inscrutable – measured, slow-paced and quiet, but without reducing itself to a pretty background. At times, it gives the impression of being quite soft (the unhurried melodies picked out on delay-treated thumb piano on the first track), yet fairly harsh sonorities are often employed, and, even when this is not the case, the music is equipped with plenty of scratchy edges, radio static crackling to one side of the main area of sonic focus. Like the ‘machine ghosts’ of the final track, it feels as if things never quite come the surface – indeed, that Skarabee never makes one bold and definite statement during the whole record, instead drifting to the side of fore-grounded ‘event’, creating a music that at times is so understated one only fully realises that it was there after it’s gone.

For me, that’s quite a wonderful thing. Though it has a quite different impact to the stripped-down and raw noise aesthetic of Chalmers’ very different project, tusK (where, in an opposite move, clear, strongly rhythmic statement is at the forefront of things), both albums share an approach to the making and manipulation of sound that is above all *unfussy*. It takes precision to set in motion and then to control the various loops and layers which appear here, but the precision that comes across in the music is of a very different kind, for it mingles with an impression of vagueness, haze, the half-heard – that which one cannot quite put one’s figure on – and the music, while remaining focused, is as much about inattention as attention. **(DG)**

WADADA LEO SMITH – SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS



Label: Cuneiform Records

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Disc One: Al-Shadhili's Litany of the Sea: Sunrise; Pacifica; Umar at the Dome of the Rock, parts 1 & 2; Crossing Sirat; South Central L.A. Kulture; Disc Two: South Central L.A. Kulture; Angela Davis; Organic; Joy : Spiritual Fire : Joy (In memory of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed)

Personnel: Disc One (Wadada Leo Smith's Golden Quintet): Wadada Leo Smith: acoustic and electric trumpet; Vijay Iyer: piano, synthesizer; John Lindberg: bass; Pheeroan AkLaff: drums; Don Moye: drums; Disc Two (Wadada Leo Smith's Organic): Wadada Leo Smith: trumpet; Michael Gregory, Brandon Ross: electric guitar; Nels Cline: 6- & 12-string electric guitar; Lamar Smith: electric guitar (on 'South Central L.A. Kulture' and 'Joy : Spiritual Fire : Joy'); Okkyung Lee: cello; Skuli Sverrisson: electric bass; John Lindberg: acoustic bass; Pheeroan AkLaff: drums

Additional Information: Disc One recorded live at Vision XIII, June 13th 2008, NYC. Disc Two recorded live at Firehouse 12, April 17th 2009, New Haven, CT.

The sound of Leo Smith's trumpet, acoustic or played through a wah-wah pedal, is always bright and direct, whether engaging in piercing mournful cries, darting melodic interplay, or punchy, jabbing blasts and flourishes. Smith is an exceptionally strong player – by which I don't mean that he's aggressively macho. Rather, his strength comes from his ability to impart authority, leadership, organisation, even when he seems to be staying in the background; it comes from his ability to choose the right note, the right phrase at the right time. As he puts it, "in music it's an aesthetic where the notion of sincerity takes place. For example, it would be inappropriate to play a note or a phrase or a rhythm that you didn't feel."¹ Consequently, his presence is felt when he chooses *not* to play almost as much as when he does: interjecting with a brief phrase that somehow seems to clarify and bring together what the rest of the band has been playing in his absence, opening up a direction which may then be switched as he comes in again, a few minutes later, with a totally new idea. There's a lot riding on the use of space, on the use of pauses, re-starts, back-tracks, proclamations, declamations, declarations, statements, articulations: for though this is music, and not the language of spoken conversation, speech is always at the back of whatever Smith plays, as it is with Ornette Coleman or with any blues player worth their salt. The emotional openness, the tempering of strength with vulnerability, might seem removed from the language of public speech – at least, to a generation grown cynical at the blandishments of corrupt politicians and establishment figures. Despite this, one would do well to remember that the music is performed in public (by which I don't just mean the audience; for both they and the other musicians in the band are at once participants and witnesses to what any one musician is doing). What we hear on 'Spiritual Dimensions' melds interior and exterior, form and feeling, collective ritual and individual consideration into a whole that might very well be described as 'organic'.

¹ Kevin Le Gendre, "Spirits Rejoice", *Jazzwise*, December 2008 / January 2009, Issue 126

Smith's trumpet is very much the lead voice on these nine lengthy pieces, spread over two discs, but the bands are quite different. The Golden Quartet, here expanded to a Quintet through the addition of an extra drummer, has been one of Smith's major projects of recent years, and though the personnel changes from one release to the next (Anthony Davis, Malachi Favors, Jack deJohnette and Ronald Shannon Jackson are all previous members of the group), a definite continuity is maintained. In general, one might say that the emphasis is on free improvisation (I'm aware that Smith would claim that *all* his music is 'free', that such labels as 'free jazz' or 'free improvisation' are a constricting imposition on open creativity, and he's probably right – nonetheless, I hope that using such a journalistic short-cut allows for a clear description of what can be heard in the music). 'Al-Shadhili's Litany of the Sea: Sunrise' opens with a barely-audible synthesizer wash before John Lindberg's twanging bass figures (at once providing a sense of certain ground and sure placing, and leaving room for a world of potentialities) and Vijay Iyer's sonorous piano lay the ground for Smith, taking his time, building up statements with an under-stated force and clarity to them. It's tempting to draw parallels between the music and its dedicatee, the founder of the Tariqa Shadhili, a North African/Egyptian Sufi order: mysticism might approximate the mysterious logic of improvised musical interaction, and something of its boundless openness, its capacity for multiple combinations, directions, and fields of activity, is also suggested by the following description of Shadhili: "He gave me forty sciences. He was an ocean without a shore."

'Pacifica': chiming, bell-like, solemn; a pause and a rapid turnaround, a quick twist and a swish of the tail, a leap into steely moto perpetuo stylings; sense of the static bursting with potentialities of movement. For some reason, the track fades out as it changes direction, tempo quickening from the reverie into which things had settled. 'Umar at the Dome of the Rock' is where one really hears what each individual musician in the band can do, through a series of ample solos. Particularly impressive is John Lindberg on acoustic bass, seemingly heading in a Jimmy Garrison direction with his strumming, almost flamenco-flavoured figures, before transforming these into much more percussive, throbbing, thwacking things, building a totally absorbing rhythmic intensity. 'Sirat': composed phrases melding with spiralling improvisations, Vijay Iyer's dark-hued sprinklings of notes, always following the logic of each phrase, led on by the cumulative energy and flow of what he plays, Smith, by contrast, placing his quick flurries around held tones.

'South Central L.A. Kulture' is performed in two versions, at the close of the first disc and the start of the second. In both, it emerges from

Smith's piercing, mournful solo – slow phrases interspersed with repeating trilled clarions, like a more brittle, less vulnerable Miles Davis. That said, Davis, whose 70s music Smith paid tribute to in the band Yo Miles!, is an influence not so much in the trumpet phrasing or even tone (despite the use of wah-wah pedal), as in the contextual backdrop – most obviously on the performances by Organic, a guitar-heavy electric group whose music tends to sound like jazz fusion. On the Golden Quintet disc, the rhythmic backdrop is less locked-in, less relentlessly groove-focussed. This may in fact be due to the presence of two drummers, upping the rhythmic complexity, though often, they mesh so well that they almost become one, sticking to particular areas of their own kit in order to complement each other, rather than getting in each-others' way, or drowning out the other musicians with the force of combined bombast. That said, 'L.A. Kulture' soon moves into a very groovy bass-line, sometimes reminiscent of funk, sometimes with a Latin vibe which possesses the same sort of capacity to inspire passionate, lengthy solos as Mingus' 'Ysabel's Table Dance' from 'Tijuana Moods'. The 'Organic' version emphasises the groove element even more, in a manner very reminiscent of Yo Miles!, with added bass guitar, AkLaff, the single drummer, laying down a more straightforwardly metronomic rock-beat, and guitars swirling and twanging around the groove. For all these reasons, and despite the larger size of the band, it's fairly one-directional, and thus holds less interest for me than the more open interplay of the Quintet (for instance, Lindberg's electronically-manipulated acoustic bass is more texturally interesting and unusual than the fat fusion bass on disc 2). The roving harmonic approach of Vijay Iyer's piano is also missed – ducking in and out and round about, it forces itself into the crannies around Smith's trumpet, rather than imposing its own commands. With Organic, by contrast, the focus is less on detail, more on a general forward-driving pulse and a particular set of sounds. This may sound unduly negative, and it's not meant to be: once you accept that the groove is the way things are going, and that your attention may occasionally wander, it becomes easy to like this music, particularly when, as on 'Angela Davis', Okkyung Lee's cello is threading its way in and out of the foreground, or when, as at the start of 'Organic', things turn all spacey, with reams of sci-fi echo. Smith is one of the most important musicians around today, and 'Spiritual Dimensions' is ample evidence of his commitment, his drive, his charge. **(DG)**

ESPERANZA SPALDING – *ESPERANZA*



Label: Heads Up International

Release Date: 2008

Tracklist: Ponta de Areia; I Know You Know; Fall In; I Adore You; Cuerpo y Alma(Body & Soul); She Got to You; Precious; Mela; Love in Time; Espera; Samba em Preludio.

Personnel: Esperanza Spalding: bass, vocals; Gretchen Parlato: vocals; Jamey Haddad: percussion; Otis Brown: drums; Nino Josele: acoustic guitar; Donald Harrison: tenor saxophone; Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez: drums; Leo Genovese: piano; Ambrose Akinmusire: trumpet.

If anyone is willing to take a bet on the next most likely big name in jazz, surely bassist/ singer Esperanza Spalding is worth a punt. Still only in her mid-twenties, she has already attracted much attention in the State and currently plays bass in Joe Lovano's band. Although not her first offering, this eponymous CD is her most profile and features her tight band of Leo Genovese' piano, Jamey Haddad's percussion and the drums of Otis Brown. On some of the tracks, this group is augmented by Donald Harrison's alto and the pithy trumpet of Ambrose Akinmusire with some tunes incorporating either backing vocals or multi-tracking. If this suggests an over-produced piece of pop-jazz, the edginess of much of

this music quickly dispels this notion. The leader switches between acoustic and electric bass with equal facility.

The opening track is Milton Nascimento's beautiful "Ponta De Areia" which received a nice treatment and is a pretty strong opener. Elsewhere, the disc is essentially made up of Spalding originals which, by and large, tend to hit the spot, with "Fall in", a effort for voice and piano, demonstrating her craftsmanship as a songwriter. Much of the material has a Brazilian feel to it but with the kind of bite that marked Tania Maria's best work of the early 1980's such as "Come with me." This is typified by the likes of "I adore you" whose title belies its ebullience. Elsewhere, the only standard, "Body & Soul", is re-shaped with a boisterous vamp from the leader's bass and some Portuguese lyrics and emerges as probably one of the most original arrangements since John Coltrane's. This is one of the highlights of a very strong album and allows the band to stretch out in a fashion that will appeal to most, hardened jazz fans.

The lyrics are decidedly streetwise and the sentiments expressed are very much in line with much contemporary pop. A track like "She got to you" demonstrates that it is possible for a singer to remain thoroughly up-to-date without losing any of the toughness of jazz whereas "Precious" is a more obvious attempt to appeal to a wider audience with the fender Rhodes piano, vocal over-dubbing and some feisty feminist lyrics- a terrific tune though. In contrast, the largely instrumental "Mela" pits Spalding's wordless vocal in unison with a trumpet in the album's most strident and ultimately uncompromising track. This swinging post-bop track packs one of the biggest punches on the whole CD and demonstrates that just how tight the band is, the leader's bass entangling with the drums and the Argentine Leo Genovese contributing some tasty piano. "If that's true" illustrates just how hip-hop grooves have started to manifest themselves in jazz before mutating into a quintet outing for trumpet, alto, bass and drums with the stripped down nakedness of the group exposes Spalding's willingness to mix up the rhythm since the pianist only plays during his solo.

In summary, this is a hugely impressive record, where Esperanza Spalding proves herself very much to be a force on the various basses, as well as a singer / songwriter likely to attract listeners from outside jazz without any concessions to the integrity of the music. With there already a plethora of singers of the jazz scene, for once here is a musician who sounds like she belongs in 2009. Clearly, Esperanza Spalding is already a major talent and whilst her appearance at Vienne this year was one of the festival highlights, there seems little doubt that this is one of the most exciting records by a young artist I have heard this year. Watch this space. **(Ian Thumwood)**

DAVID SYLVIAN – MANAFON



Label: Samadhisound

Release Date: September 2009

Tracklist: Small Metal Gods; The Rabbit Skinner; Random Acts of Senseless Violence; The Greatest Living Englishman; 125 Spheres; Snow White in Appalachia; Emily Dickinson; The Department of Dead Letters; Manafon

Personnel: David Sylvian: vocals, guitar, electronics/ with collective personnel: Evan Parker: soprano and tenor sax; John Tilbury: piano; Marcio Mattos: cello; Joel Ryan: signal processing; Keith Rowe: guitar; Tetuzi Aakiyama: electric and acoustic guitar; Otomo Yoshihide: acoustic guitar, turntables; Toshimaru Nakamura: no-input mixer; Sachiko M: sine-wave sampler; Christian Fennesz: guitar, laptop; Burkard Stangl: guitar; Michael Moser: cello; Werner Dafeldecker; bass

A problem I suspect many listeners will have with this record is that it does not fulfill the expectations aroused by its fantastic international line-up of leading free improvisers, and Sylvian's claim to have left their recordings untampered with. It is not a free improvisation album, but is a collection of songs – albeit with none of the rhythmic rigidity or emotional superficiality some might associate with the 'pop song.' What one has to accept is that the improvisations are there strictly

as background – in much the same way that Derek Bailey’s guitar enhanced the stark, spare, almost deadpan bleakness of Sylvian’s delivery on ‘Blemish’, often by not really seeming to do that much. In these backgrounds, *atmospheres* are created (appropriate to the darkness and shadows of the cover photograph, with its similarity to Von Trier’s ‘Antichrist’); essentially, the free improvisers are functioning as session musicians, creating a mood and texture which fits the lyrics and delivery of the singer, the main focus. Of course, that’s complicated by the fact that the improvisations were recorded first, Sylvian overdubbing his voice and guitar at a later stage, and this might lead one to suspect that it was *he* who had to adapt to the instrumental ‘backgrounds’ – but, listening to the record, it’s clear that he does what he does in a manner not substantially changed from elsewhere. Nonetheless, he’s not out of sync with the improvisers, and is often in rather beautiful concordance with them: take the ending of ‘Snow White in Appalachia’, where the lyric “the radio falls silent but for short bursts of static” seems to comment on the music and the way it moves to an end –buzzing and crackling over faint fading, droning loops – just as much as on the story told by the song.

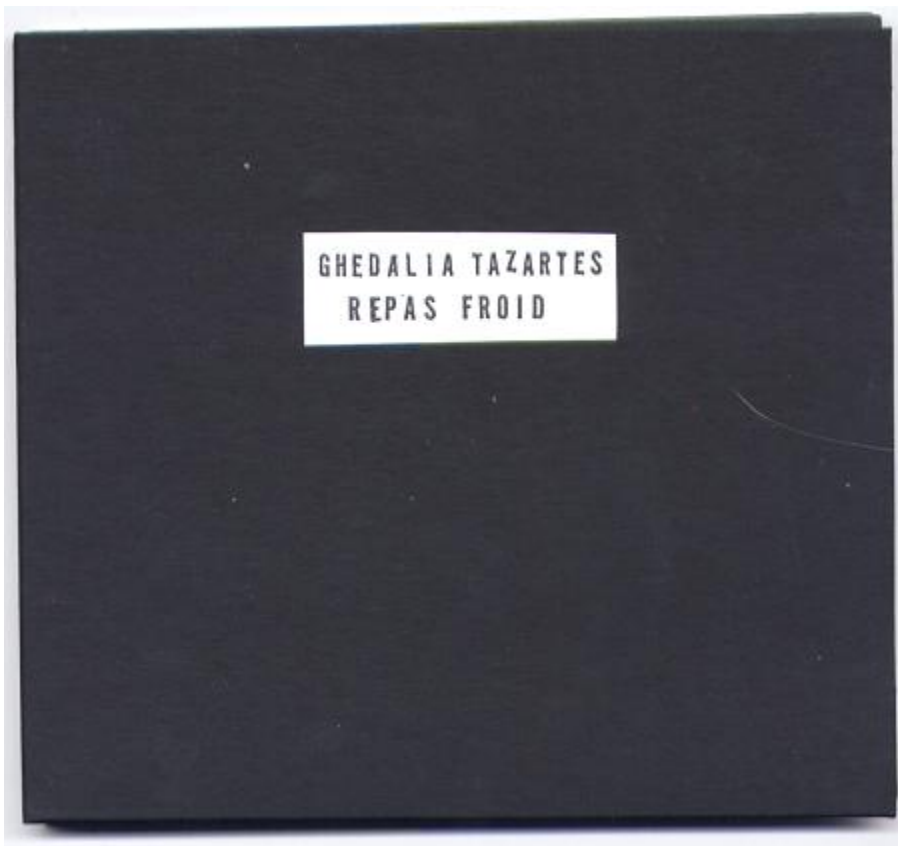
Attention is primarily, then, on Sylvian’s voice and lyrics; repeating small melodic fragments, which are designed to fit the contour of the words in a manner approaching speak-singing (the ‘tunes’ aren’t exactly hummable), with occasional harmonized overdubs and faint reverbed echoes only serving to emphasize the unusual thinness of texture. The music never *moves* as such (perhaps that’s why it doesn’t really feel ‘improvised’): melodies repeat, but not to indoctrinate us with their charms. Rather, as with Jandek, it’s always the words that one concentrates on, or thinks that one is concentrating on, the music oozing into consciousness less clearly, sneaking in by the back door.

These words tread a line between poetry (on the most basic level – some of them rhyme) and prose; often flatly descriptive, they accumulate details in an unhurried, and often quite devastating manner. This is most often successful because it moves away from the ‘confessional’ approach of the singer-songwriter (the first-person is used only on the opening ‘Small Metal Gods’); and, if talking about others is still a way of talking about yourself (or the parts of yourself that you wouldn’t want to address directly), maybe that engenders a more honest, or at least a more interesting approach. At their best, Sylvian’s lyrics somehow manage to create (mostly) sympathetic characterization through distance and apparent detachment: stories stripped back to essentials, to observed details (the way the suicidal writer of ‘The Greatest Living Englishman’ refuses to meet one’s eyes, the chemical processes (drugs in the bloodstream) behind the actions of the woman in ‘Snow White in

Appalachia'). These stories *are* specific – they are about people in particularly circumstances and situations – yet, by refusing to name their characters (who are described simply as 'he' or 'she'), they avoid being forced into a limiting contextualization ('this song records this emotion at this time sparked by this event'). Perhaps this also allows the occasional, rather biting ironic edge to seem less cruel; the way Sylvian alludes to the melody of Lennon and McCartney's 'Yesterday' throughout 'The Greatest Living Englishman' is mockery in part, but mockery that arises from, or at least alongside, a keen and sorrowful sense of human weakness.

In terms of the music, the free improvisers' contributions only really stand out towards the end of the record; after Sylvian has finished 'Emily Dickinson', his story of loneliness and isolation, Evan Parker's soprano melodies, their flowing repetitions and gliding melancholia flecked with broken, tongued notes, reach an overtly emotional climax never allowed in Sylvian's near-deadened invocations of despair, distress and doubt. This slides into the only purely instrumental piece on the album, 'The Department of Dead Letters': again featuring Parker (though this time on tenor) and John Tilbury, along with Marcio Mattos on cello, it's moody and subdued, and one does suspect that it was cut with Sylvian's intentions in mind (it's not clear exactly what instructions the improvisers were given beforehand, but their playing sounds somewhat more restrained than it might be in the completely free contexts in which they normally work). Still, for the free improv listener, this will probably be the most satisfying part of the album; and 'Manafon', the closing piece, is probably the disc's highlight, moving slowly from the scrapes and hisses of a long instrumental opening into Sylvian's portrait of the Welsh writer R.S. Thomas, who tries to alleviate his growing bitterness and frustration by "moving back in time," a "physical essential" ('essential' in the sense that, the more he moves forward in time, the closer he reaches death; though, of course, 'impossible' as well, for moving back in time is a physical impossibility), and by dreaming of "moving west," of raging in more than frustrated old age ("battles raged against the Furies that might see him at his best"). There's a layer of irony, of the sardonic, through even Sylvian's most apparently tender portraits: the lines immediately following the description of Thomas' dreams for more meaningful struggle are those that end the song, and the album: "there's a man down in the valley, don't know his right foot from his left." From the very strategies Thomas has employed to fight his demons, his mind disintegrates; failure to combat failure, failure on failure. It's a bleak way to end what is a bleak record, one which creates an aura round itself, not of generalized melancholy, but of a sadness born out of empathy and out of a sometimes ironized frustration at wasted lives and inescapable cul-de-sacs. **(DG)**

GHDALIA TAZARTÈS - REPAS FROID



Label: t a n z p r o c e s z

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Twenty Untitled Tracks

Personnel: Ghédalia Tazartès: sounds

While Ghédalia Tazartès' media profile has increased slightly since I first came across his music a few years ago (for one thing, he has started to give public performances), there's still more than a hint of the enigma about both man and music. Fittingly, then, the only information that comes with this CD is that it contains recordings selected from Tazartès' 'archives'; even the people who released 'Repas Froid' seem unsure as to its exact origin.

The shortness of these twenty untitled tracks (even the longest, which lasts nine minutes, is actually a series of shorter pieces spliced together) intensifies the ramshackle, fragmentary feel of the disc; it's as if we're tuned into Tazartès' brain, broadcasting on some strange frequency that's been accidentally discovered by a battered-up, antique old radio. The effect is frequently funny and sometimes exhilarating, but it can also be disturbing, as demonstrated by the use of a recurring slamming door sample on the first few tracks, mixed variously with accordions, Tazartès' own arresting vocals, and fragments from what sound like a radio play.

It's not just the door sample that re-appears on different tracks; certain samples come back again and again, tics repeated so that they turn into full-blown gurning grimaces. What sound like programmed beats also occasionally make their appearance, but as minor elements in the overall texture rather than as a driving force which the track can rest on – for beats would give a sense of solidity and of forward momentum that Tazartès continuously avoids. Though this is a very *busy* disc – there's a huge variety of different sounds and moods – it's not busy in the service of a narrative (like a concept album), or even in an anecdotal sense. Rather, one becomes caught up in the rush, one's ears adjusting, though never becoming completely accustomed to, the way the tracks work. (The reason that there's no problem with lack of 'cohesion' is that the notion of 'cohesion' just doesn't come into things.)

I'm pretty sure that some of these sounds have appeared on other Tazartès records – I can imagine a roomful of reel-to-reel tapes from which he picks and chooses at will, dusting a few stacks off when someone suggests he makes a record. After all, it's that home-made feel which makes his sonic creations so attractive – that, and the constant audacity of his choices (on one piece, juxtaposing a young child's voice with a chorus of birds, on another, building up layers of vocals with amplified recordings of cicadas to create a cross between a choral piece, noise music, and a warped field recording – before switching direction once again). There's not much point in me giving a further, more detailed breakdown of what happens on each track, because that's not how listening to the disc works; it's really something you have to discover for yourself. And so this review finishes with the recommendation that you seek out 'Repas Froid' and take a listen as soon as you can! **(DG)**

THE THING – BAG IT!



Label: Smalltown Superjazz

Release Date: June 2009

Tracklisting: Hidegen Fujinaka Szelek; Drop the Gun; Bag It!; Snusvisan; Hot Doug; Mystery Song; Angels; BONUS DISCK: Beef Brisket (For Ruby's)

Personnel: Mats Gustafsson: saxophones, electronics; Ingebrit Haker Flaten: bass, electronics; Paale Nilssen-Love: drums

Could there be such a thing as populist free jazz? (Well, if we ignore the fact that free jazz is or should be or could be the true 'music of the people', anyway...) The Thing provide a fine example of what it might be if it did exist– not blending skronk to mindless beats in order to add some superficial colour to the music, but being swept up on the energies of multiple genres to create a uniquely joyous, adrenaline-fuelled rush. 'Bag It!' opens with a cover of 'Hidegen Fujinaka Szelek' by The Ex, given the sort of full-tilt, brutally rhythmic approach that characterized the group's collaboration with Cato Salsa Experience and Joe McPhee, though with a determination and taut compactness that to me surpasses that of the earlier recording. This is very much groove-based free jazz: you could (initially) dance to 'Drop the Gun' (another cover, of a song by Japan's 54 Nude Honeys), Gustafsson's baritone in tandem with Haker Flaten giving a bass-heavy treatment to the melody, and some skronkingly noisy electronics pummeling waves of distorted feedback in a 'solo' of sorts (more like a noisy smear) over unstoppable beats, before everything dissolves into the sound of bleeding electronics, shuddering and rumbling, blowing ear-splitting raspberries and letting out all kinds of machine grunts, Nilssen-Love still pummeling away like mad but only just making himself heard as a kind of metallic blinding sheen glinting from the crowded surface. For the last few minutes of this track, then, it's hard to say whether we're listening to 'free jazz' (where's the instrumentation that's become so enmeshed with that genre?) or to 'noise' or to 'free noise', and it doesn't matter because it's a wonderful sound, propelling itself along in a manner that allows for the sort of loss of control that might seem lacking when, for instance, Gustafsson solos over a repetitive bass riff on the title track. In any case, and in any context, it's hard not to admire, or at least be swept along by the man's playing –lifting his horn out of his mouth for vocal exhortations like those of Pharoah Sanders, crying out, quacking, screaming with a determined possession, rolling out rumbling riffs in the rasping low register of the baritone.

Of course, these qualities and tactics are always there in Gustafsson's playing, but the electronics are a new and noteworthy element, and are integrated particularly well on 'Hot Doug', where a growling drone imbues the saxophone melody with a sense of terrible fragility, acoustic statement under the overwhelming threat of machine noise. But away from this, and away from the grooves and the free

blowing, there are some more overtly jazz-flavoured moments as well. Duke Ellington's 'Mystery Song,' while not typically Ellingtonian in the slightest, finds Gustafsson blowing strong and assertively tender (his lines as ever drip with emotion, with unconcealed passion), Haker Flaten moving from fast and free walking bass to the buzzing repeated notes which, in tandem with Nilssen-Love, slowly take the track to its diminuendo conclusion. Ayler's 'Angels' is a more obvious choice, but given an equally surprising twist: a solo Gustafsson breathily intones the melody before Haker Flaten's creeping electronics add an eerie sine wave, alongside assorted buzzes and squelches, with Nilssen-Love's fragmented rustling and crashing getting louder and louder as the electronics come to dominate the texture. Perhaps the most intriguing track on the record, this could easily have gone two ways: an Ayleresque blow-out, or an electronic noise piece like the second half of 'Drop the Gun.' Both directions would have still ensured some fine music, but they would perhaps be too obvious, given the rest of the record and given The Thing's reputation: thus, what we are presented with is something closer in spirit to the original Ayler piece, where Cal Cobb's curiously neo-classical harpsichord added a kind of formalist ghostliness to Ayler's intoning. The electronics never quite reach out to their full harshness, into the red of volume overdrive, but become dominant enough to become oddly unsettling, when contrasted with Gustafsson's restrained yet utterly soulful playing. It's proof that The Thing can maintain a delicate balance when they want; more proof is offered on the bonus track, a thirty-minute improv in which the usual pounding exhortations share space with a surprisingly subdued electronic 'interlude' and even quasi-Tibetan temple chimes and drones. One senses that the parameters are widening for a band who have, in any case, worked in many different contexts during their short history thus far; and, on the evidence of this album, that can only be a good thing. **(DG)**

THE THING – NOW AND FOREVER

Label: Smalltown Superjazz

Release Date: 2007

Tracklisting:

DISC ONE (The Thing (2000)): Awake Nu; Nopti; Cherryco; Ode to Don; The Art of Steve Roney – Smilin'; Trans-Love Airways

DISC TWO (SheKnows...(2001)): To Bring You My Love; The Thing; Baby Talk; Going Home; For Real; Old Eyes

DISC THREE (Live at Oya (2005)): Art Star; The Witch; Aluminum/Have Love Will Travel; No Crowd Surfing

DISC FOUR (Gluttony (2007)): Gluttony

Personnel: Mats Gustafsson: saxophones; Ingebrit Haker Flaten: bass; Paale Nilssen-Love: drums; with Joe McPhee (Disc 2) and Thurston Moore (Disc 3)

Additional Information: 4-CD boxset. Disc 3 is a DVD.



A partial career retrospective so far for this fine trio, containing their first two albums, a DVD of a live performance featuring Thurston Moore, and an improv session from 2007 entitled 'Gluttony' which receives its only release as part of this set. The group have of course made several other albums, notably as a kind of punk jazz supergroup with Cato Salso Experience and Joe McPhee, but this is nonetheless a pretty good selection.

First up, the debut recording: it's hard to go wrong with a set of Don Cherry's wonderful melodies, and the trio prove fully capable of turning them into some brawny free jazz workouts, Gustafsson powering away with a vocalised intensity which, while it might be the norm for many free jazz players, is taken up just that extra notch, so one feels that he is doing more than just 'doing the trick', his style bursting from what have become an idiomatic hall-mark into a set of personalised and forcefully impressive aesthetics. Furthermore, rather than just going up there and doing his thing every time, Gustafsson has a real control and

ability to think through improvisational situations, and he knows when to let Cherry's melodies simply sing out their simple pleasures without overblowing and bite. And this never feels like a forced jazz trio situation either, as it might have: tune and improvisation are umbilically linked, so that it's not simply a case of playing the head and then blowing one's head off. The album still feels fresh and worth repeated listenings nearly a decade on.

The addition of Joe McPhee to the line-up broadens the texture and unleashes a humorous, anarchic streak within the disciplined grooves and tight structures surrounding the group's free blowing. At the same time, an influence from outside of jazz begins to be felt that is more pronounced than on the debut disc, with covers of a song by PJ Harvey and the traditional 'Going Home' paying tributes to pasts and futures, to tributaries leading both in and out of the history and traditions of jazz. Pieces by Don Cherry, James Blood Ulmer, Frank Lowe and McPhee himself round out what is an impressive selection of compositional material – and, interestingly, given that all but McPhee are Europeans, it's one that emerges from a specifically American lineage, with its roots in gut-bucket honking, blues wailing, and a rhythmic emphasis associated with dance, rather than the more abstract and spacious worlds of 'European Free Improvisation'. Of course, such a distinction works on simplifying polarities: nonetheless, The Thing set out their stall very much as a free jazz group, embracing the wild and passionate spirit that McPhee's been demonstrating since the 70s.

The third disc is a DVD documenting a live performance by the group, on a festival stage at Oya. From the brief crowd shots, it's hard to tell whether the festival-goers are nonplussed or intrigued, though several can be seen smiling and jigging in admiration, and there's warm applause at the end of the tunes. The most striking thing about the music is its strongly rhythmic approach, down as much to Haker-Flaten and Gustafsson as to Nilssen-Love. Watching Flaten strike the strings, bending them double with the force of his fingers, or *attacking* them with some manic bowing, it's clear that this is a man on a mission, and the firm riffs he throws out underneath Gustafsson's screeching rhythmic patterns serve to anchor the music in a way that might have made it more immediately accessible to the rock crowd (that, and the fact that the band cover tunes by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and The White Stripes, though they transform them into little Ayler-like song-fragments to the form the basis for improvisation rather than letting their music be warped too far from its origins). Ironically enough, it's when a genuine rock musician joins the band that things become more abstract and noisy, as Thurston Moore springs onstage for the final piece, a ten-minute noise jam dominated by the feed-back howls and rumbles of his

electric guitar. In the face of such noise, even Gustafsson's beefy saxophone finds it hard to compete; for much of the time, he's restricted to blowing long, held multiphonics, and sometimes dropping out altogether. Flaten's bass playing though, is absolutely ferocious, sawing away with the bow for the first few minutes and even introducing a few riff-like figures towards the end. 'Live at Oya' is not a particularly long set, by free jazz standards (the disc plays for just over 30 minutes), but it's nice to see the physical dimension existing behind the sounds – something obvious from just listening to the albums, even more obvious with visual evidence.

The most recent recording, 'Gluttony', departs from the rock-tune based approach in favour of a continuous forty-five minute free improvisation, though Gustafsson's tendency to go flat out for the most 'direct' (or obvious) manifestation of emotion means that the music often shares a similar heated temperature. Such emotionalism is, of course, part of a great free jazz tradition – from Ayler's vibrato to Sander's wide-open shriek – but, in fact, when Gustafsson tones down the bombast, the results are just as, if not more, compelling. The whole thing starts off as baritone bleats are emitted with a plosive, tongued edge. Building through repetition, Gustafsson storms into his patented throaty baritone yell, hammering away at a single alternating figure and subsiding with it before Haker-Flaten takes a fractured bass solo. Back in on alto, Gustafsson's hardness here has an almost swooning quality to it as he bends his notes round in circling, swooping figures. Nilssen-Love giving his drumset a succession of vicious thwacks, intensity ratchets: busy bass and drum scuttle, a hoarse alto desperation, with held multiphonics and even something of the delirious quality of Captain Beefheart's shenai playing, trilling and fluttering without the slightest hint of delicacy. Exhilarating propulsion, on the edge of total panicked overload. As more and more melodic phrases creep in, a dip and a drum solo, pitter-patter cymbal-work keeping up a tinkling dance over the thuds and thwacks. Gustafsson honking away on baritone: pop and slap of tongue and breath, spittle-fuelled. Minimal drums skirting round a pulse. Bass and baritone playing notes that are growled and spattered, skewed, spat out and barfed, but with much held in check, in tension. Slow, held multiphonic and cautious gentle bass pluck, in the most hushed passage so far, pushing things to see how quiet they can go – less in your-face but perhaps even more intense than the full-blown free jazz sections because unexpected, because forcing concentration. Breath and scratch, creak and groan. Texture of bow on string, reverberant drag. Sudden cymbals, but no swing back to bombast – crashing punctuations of slide sax's yearning yawn. The slide sax, sounding somewhere between a clarinet, flute and sax; a whimpering dog's whine, then a throttled bird, voice rising high, strangled, out of its throat; a human or an animal plea, the

tremor of uncertainty. As might be expected, the temperature rises again, and the concluding section of the disc is pedal-to-the-metal stuff; but it's such moments as those described above that really make it for me, that really take things into a different space.

Anyway, in sum, there's plenty to sustain the interest over these four discs. It's hard to believe that this group have been going for ten years now, and such freshness is testament to the consistent high quality of music they produce. For more evidence, look no further than their latest, 'Bag It', also reviewed in this issue. **(DG)**

tusK – 10 GREATEST HITS!

Label: Stomoxine Records

Release Date: September 2009

Tracklist: eject; rupture; malfunction; magma; splice; tectonic; repeat; static; explode; loop; drone

Personnel: tusK (Stuart Chalmers): oscillator machine, circuit bent pedals, other electronics

Additional Information: Download Release, available from <http://stomoxinerecords.free.fr>

So where is Noise at today? An initially radical gesture, focussing exclusively on the 'non-musical' elements of music in the creation of extended sound experiences, it has now become, as the trend always goes, a marketable genre: previous extremes having reached dead ends, new directions branch off from the latest limits, before they, too, face assimilation. By 'assimilation' I don't necessarily mean incorporation into the mainstream, but rather, the maintenance of the radical gesture as a kind of controlled 'resistance' to that mainstream. This creates a tension which, though very real, is also in some sense illusory, as it allows a modicum of conflict (which is, however, never going to mount a serious challenge) to spice things up a little and keep things ticking over nicely just as they are. When the 'fuck you' gestures of the experimental side of rock music seemed to have reached the limits of assimilation, noise took things further out (further, even, than the screaming choir of horns on Coltrane's 'Ascension' or the dense textures of Alan Silva's 'Luna Surface', masses of sound forcing their way out of the speakers like the impasto oil paint hanging off a Frank Auerbach canvas, so layered and crusty that it could be called a kind of relief sculpture). Furthermore, it could trace a heritage going back to Luigi Russolo and the Futurists' paradoxical embrace of modernity, right through those moments in popular, classical and jazz musics in which instrumental textures had created densities of sound in which individual lines or groups could no longer be distinguished.

The packaging of '10 Greatest Hits' suggests a parody of the pop music forms which noise music inherently resists (the slab of feedback which formed an 'interlude' on the original studio recording of My Bloody Valentine's 'You Made Me Realize' became, in the band's live

performances, something which completely overwhelmed the cursory 'song' bookend, turning the feedback and noise of large-scale concert rock into a howling and total body experience). Yet one must ask: is this resistance now inherent? Bands such as Boris and Sunn O))) have tapped into another market (the avant-metal scene – and, through the work of Stephen O' Malley, the art world), and harsh and glitchy sounds which might previously have been heard as 'errors' are now part and parcel of much contemporary electronic dance music. While noise itself attracts a very definite and specific crowd (it remains very much *caché* music), the set of gestures, both musical and extra-musical, which have developed around and within it, might have been said to have solidified so that it has lost its dangerous edge. Of course, the same criticism could be levelled at any number of genres – free jazz and (acoustic) free improvisation – with debatable levels of accuracy.

The primary 'gesture' I am thinking of is the role of rhythm. Given that noise is devoid of so much of the material that makes up 'normal' music – melody, harmony, and even the particular kinds of texture and textural interaction which free improvisation can utilise – there tends to be a strong, compensating focus on rhythm, often blatant and loudly industrial in nature. Compared to the polyrhythms and free time of a Rashied Ali or Sunny Murray, in fact, noise's rhythmic assault is relentlessly crude, a reduction to its mechanised essence of the kind of popular music beat-making which Theodor Adorno famously compared to the sound of (fascist) marching.¹ In this sense, the rhythms of noise music function more as reflection than as resistance. They do not cover up the dark heart of modern society with veneers of manufactured joy and the illusory impression that individuals have the freedom to emotionally interpret and 'make their own' the pre-fabricated products of the culture industry's pawns, but neither do they posit an independent alternative. Instead, they constitute a kind of truth-telling about how things are, about how existence and experience exist at this time – though they do not do this through explicit political content (Merzbow's embrace of vegetarianism and 'save the whales' is not really a part of his music, even if the stickers which he plasters on his laptop are in such physical proximity to his sound-making device). Still, even if there is no explicit 'message', such an interpretation does come close to assigning Noise a *zeitgeisty*, mimetic function; and, admittedly, this kind of mimesis also does come through in comments of Adorno's such as "modern art is as abstract as the relations between people have in truth become,"² though

¹ "As the standardized meter of dance music and of marching suggests the coordinated battalions of a mechanical collectivity, obedience to this rhythm by overcoming the responding individuals leads them to conceive of themselves as agglutinated with the untold millions of the meek who must be similarly overcome. Thus do the obedient inherit the earth." (Adorno, *On Popular Music* (available online at <http://libcom.org/library/on-pop-music-theodor-adorno-george-simpson>))

² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

elsewhere he argues for a concentration on *form*, from which an artwork's historical 'truth-content' can then emerge, semi-independently of the artist themselves ("the content of a work of art begins precisely where the author's intention stops; the intention is extinguished in the content"³).

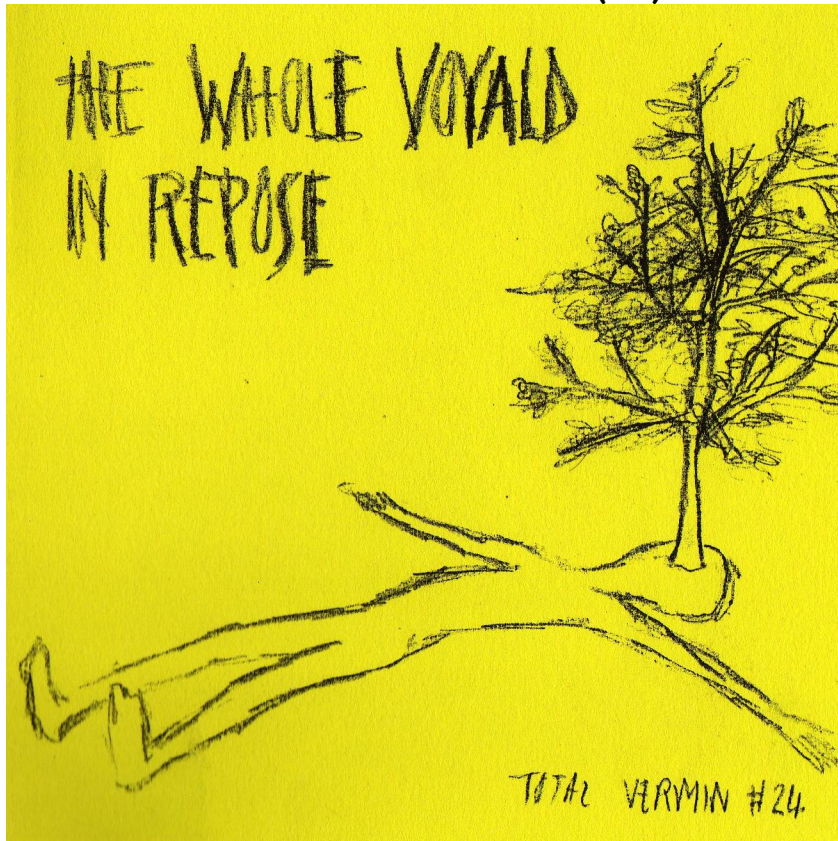
Whether consciously or not, then, any Noise artist's use of rhythm comes already bound up with a complex and paradoxical series of questions about the role of music and sound within the structures of contemporary society – not as add-ons which impart the music with a pseudo-intellectual weight, but as questions fundamentally entangled with Noise, at the most level of the most basic practices and gestures which any Noise artist makes as soon as they begin to make Noise. And tusK (Stuart Chalmers) seems to be concerned with this rhythmic aspect of Noise more than most, whether as part of a conscious intellectual engagement with the issues outlined above, or as part of an engagement with the mechanics of Noise-making, as part of his improvisational discovery of means and methods, the very different process of creating rather than merely listening. As he puts it on his website (<http://www.myspace.com/tuskk>): "material is allowed to move in which ever way the sounds or instrumentation determines."

That instrumentation consists of a couple of oscillators with various pedals and effects, and the format seems to be broadly within that of the three-minute pop song (this could have been a conscious initial decision, made at the conceptual stage for the album, or it could simply have been what happened when performing). In any case it's a good example of the way instrumentation completely changes identity – in contrast to Chalmer's other solo project, Skarabee, where the various pedals and effects are applied to gentler sounding instruments such as the kalimba, here, the harshness and crudity of the oscillators' machine squelches, zaps and trilling, seemingly uncontrolled extreme pitch oscillations means that textures must be much simpler. That said, the penultimate track, 'Drone', indicates that it is possible to create music more similar in mood to the ambient-oriented free improvisations of Skarabee: a repeating loop is underlain by wavering low drones and sprinkled with various quiet beeps, so that, most of the time, the texture consists of at least three layers. This puts in sharp contrast the starkness of the other tracks: often only one idea is followed at a time, perhaps a basic rhythm, to be joined by one other sound element before that section is discarded and a new one starts: a non-linear, non-developmental, blocky approach in which sound creation comes in discrete units. The format of short tracks is undoubtedly an important part of this, although it's by no means certain whether track length dictates track construction, or construction dictates track length; in any case, one might usefully contrast

³ Adorno, Notes to Literature

this approach to the long-form explorations of, say, Merzbow (or of the noise sections of My Bloody Valentine's live performances). What we have here is not so much a morass of sound in which one can become lost, disoriented, physically affected (though the persistent harshness of tones and the repetitive rhythmic grind of the stripped-back approach constitute their own kind of challenge). In that sense the potential for exhilaration and for a sense of liberation offered by the extreme experience of going to a Noise gig or of just listening to a Noise album is diminished; which may be a way of negotiating the problems of Noise's diminishing radicalism. One-word titles, three-minute tracks, brutally basic rhythms, deliberately restricted palettes of sound and texture: this is music that is simply there, not bludgeoning one into an experience of tortured ecstasy, making no real bones about itself, just existing as sound from the speakers. And that brutal lack of pretension (mixed with a subversive streak – those paying attention will note that there are 11 tracks on the album, despite the title) makes quite an impact. **(DG)**

THE WHOLE VOYALD – IN REPOSE (EP)



Label: Total Vermin

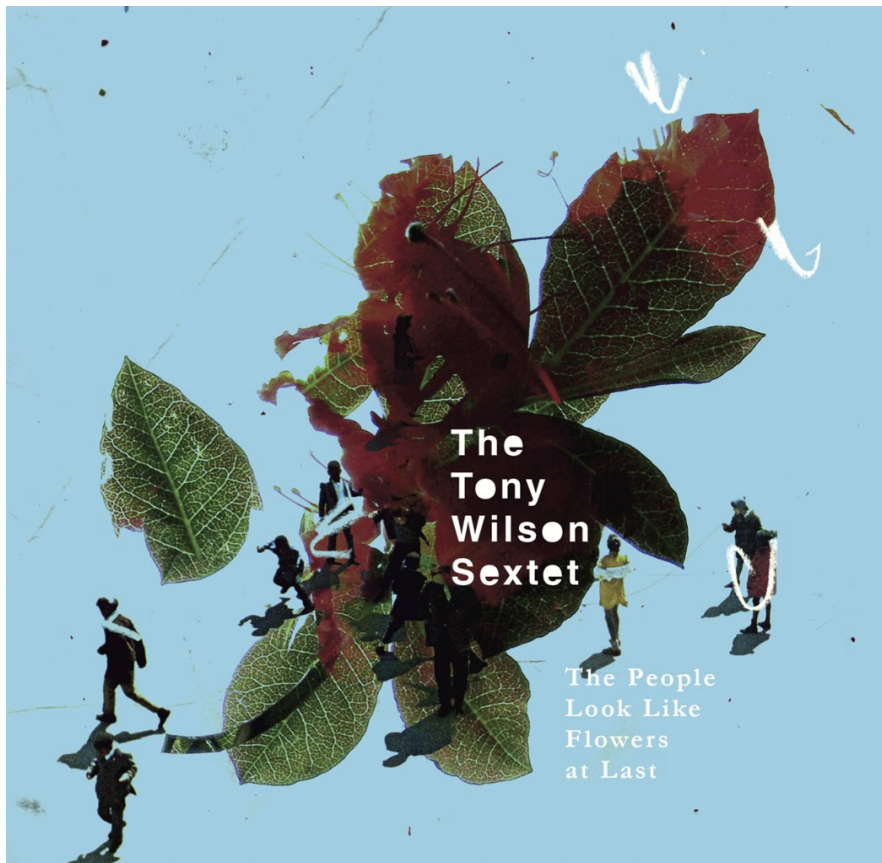
Release Date: June 2009

Tracklist: In Repose

Personnel: Stuart Arnot: trumpet; Jon Collin, Tom Settle: guitars; Jon Marshall: harmonium; Paschal Nichols: drums. Recorded live in Sheffield, December 2008.

‘Voyald’ is a hybrid word coined by writer William Sarayan, combining the notions of ‘voyage’, ‘void’ and ‘world’, and one could apply this notion this band’s music, as they move into the known unknowns of a group improvisation where overall sound is more important than individual lines or melodic development. Slowly mutating improvised textures emerge imperceptibly from initial harmonium-based drones with an obvious legacy in 1960s/70s minimalism, and, indeed, jazz – the use of the harmonium’s hovering-cloud sound brings to mind Pharoah Sanders’ deployment of the instrument on *Live at the East* – but with a slightly harsh edge caused by the tendency of the two electric guitars to shade over into ringing distortion; this becomes more pronounced as volumes increase. The trajectory is not simply quiet to loud, or repose to disturbance and back; things rise and fall more freely than that. Thus, there’s more than one climax, the most prominent of which comes around ten minutes in, as Arnot’s trumpet takes on what sounds like an electronically-distorted tone, over joyfully ululating, high-pitched double-guitar wail, and Nichol’s fervently-beating drums. The final six minutes of the piece consequently feel like a necessary, but in some ways rather overly-protracted coda. Still, at only eighteen minutes, this is one you might feel like playing again as soon as it’s finished, and then again after that. Lovely stuff. **(DG)**

TONY WILSON SEXTET – THE PEOPLE LOOK LIKE FLOWERS AT LAST



Label: Drip Audio

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Lachrymae (Prelude; Movement #1; Movement # 2; Movement # 4; Movement # 4 Variation; Movement # 7; Movement # 7 Variation; Movement # 10; Movement # 11); Arpeggio; The People Look Like Flowers at Last; Let the Monkeys Dance; Variation on a Theme

Personnel: Kevin Elaschuk: flugelhorn, trumpet; Dave Say: tenor and soprano saxes and flute; Peggy Lee: cello; Paul Blaney: double bass; Dylan van der Schyff: drums; Tony Wilson: guitar and harmonica

The disc opens with a 9-part suite feely adapted from Benjamin Britten's melancholic piece for viola and strings, 'Lachrymae' – variations on variations, as the original piece is based on John Dowland's 'If My Complaints Could Passions Move.' Something of the mood and melodic material of the Britten is sustained as a constant undercurrent to the music, which might otherwise seem to depart quite significantly from it, given its modern-jazz flavoured language. The theme is stated most clearly in the first movement, played by Wilson on harmonica, which at first seems an odd decision – Britten filtered through 'Midnight Cowboy?' – but turns out to add a slightly grating, ragged edge to the grave melody. Peggy Lee's cello gives further appropriate somber undertones, and suddenly performs some unexpected yowling, high-pitched scrapes half-way through for emotional emphasis, to add something extra to the mood of sober melodic contemplation, while not totally departing from it. The other variations generally hold the attention, though some of them rely too much on the kind of repetitive, semi-groovy drum patterns which a lot of players in this kind of slightly left-of-centre jazz seem to prefer, and which distract from the rhythmic complexity hinted at in the other instrumentalists' contributions. That said, the drums perform a fine crashing restlessness on the final piece, disturbing the hymn-like contours of Britten's melody so that the final blissful cadences (with some lovely tenor sax swoops) feel almost perfunctory, incomplete, refusing total closure.

The other compositions on the disc are all by Wilson (apart from the final variation on Bill Monroe's 'Working on a Building'), and their harmonic palette is generally richer than the 'Lachrymae' suite. 'Arpeggio' is edgy, Wilson's clean guitar picking out the melody under a horn counter-melody and some fine solos. The title track has an attractive jazz ballad melody, complex but not overly tricky; this material is first introduced by Wilson's solo guitar, ruminating privately, before the rest of the band come in and add even more colour. There's a nice, surprisingly Wayne Shorter style soprano solo (that's Shorter in his softer, more pointilistic Weather Report days, rather than in the strident, declamatory mode in which he tends to play soprano with his current quartet), and the arrangement is intricate but flowing, melody restatements intersecting and entwining with solo lines in delicate, wispy dances. The final

track, variations on an old bluegrass staple, elicits a more straightforward tenor solo, with smears and yelps to build crescendoing intensity in Michael Brecker fashion; and while this may heighten the suspicion that the solos on the record tend to do no more than required – in other words, less than they could have – the disc as a whole is more about the skill of Wilson’s arrangements and compositions, and the pleasure elicited from the layers and combinations of the small group. It’s very pleasurable to listen to, without being superficially attractive: there’s always something to listen out for, a textural richness that goes beyond surface impressions. Well worth seeking out. **(DG)**

WOZZECK: ACT I



Label: Clinical Archives

Release Date: December 2007

Tracklist: Act I

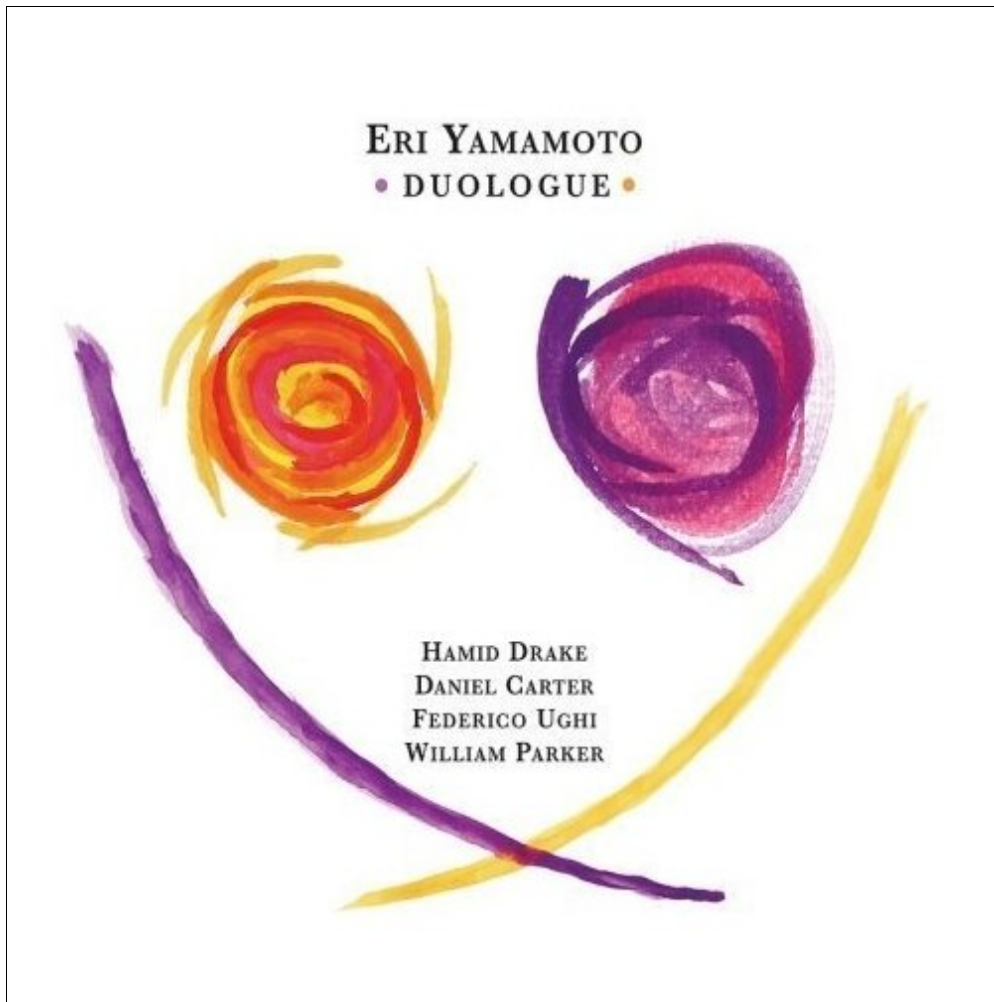
Personnel: Ilia Belorukov alto saxophone, electronics; Mikhail Ershov bass-guitar; Pavel Mikheev drums

Additional Information: Released as a free MP3 download at http://www.archive.org/details/ca087_w.

This was apparently Wozzeck's first studio session, and as such it ranks as a supremely assured debut. The group can with full confidence be described as a 'power trio,' electrified to the max, both in terms of instrumentation and the energy which courses through their performance. In addition, the forty-minute piece entitled 'Act I' demonstrates that they have a great sense of musical flow, their improvisation unfolding in a spontaneous succession of rising and falling waves of sound. Things open full-blast, Belorukov wailing over snarling electric bass and propulsive drums. With the introduction of electronic effects around ten minutes in, the textures become more dense, still throbbing with barely-contained, thrashing energy but less linear and developmental, more about a kind of vertical momentum. The effects build and build, as Belorukov first loops and multi-tracks himself on saxophone, then joins with Ershov's bass to create a crescendo of feedback. From this super-intense climax of ear-testing noise, things gradually, inexorably slow down: a long, long descent until almost nothing remains of the energy unleashed at the start, Belorukov blowing lonely reverbed lines over the minimal taps and clicks of Mikheev's drumkit and the almost imperceptible feedback drone of Ershov's bass, in an achingly melancholic passage which comes across like the aftermath of the death of a star, the explosion of brightness followed by the dwindling to nothing.

Comparisons will inevitably arise with John Zorn's Pain Killer or perhaps a guitar-less Last Exit, and it may be true that Wozzeck are exploring similar areas: their music could be loosely described as free jazz with rhythmic sensibilities influenced by rock and punk. However, they have a sense of control and development which is very different to both those groups. Belorukov is capable of the same strident and rough-hewn outbursts as Zorn and Brotzmann, but his use of electronics adds a totally different dimension; at times he disappears into the group texture, rather than – as often happens with forceful saxophone players in such contexts – being fore-grounded as the 'leading man'. In addition, we might consider the desolation of the piece's conclusion, which is as unexpected as it is naturally flowing from the preceding storms of noise. One might almost describe it as having an ambient edge, though its emotional terrain is far more complex and, one might argue, arresting than much ambient work. Ershov and Mikheev, meanwhile, are prepared to go for things full-tilt, but also to vary their approaches so that they fit with the afore-mentioned group sound (as in that final section, where punkish bass and drum momentum would be entirely inappropriate). This recording succeeds above all because Wozzeck manage the risks attendant on making this type of music, sacrificing neither emotional intensity (to listen to this disc is, above all, to be taken on an emotional journey) nor a sense of structure and texture. 'Act I' is well worth seeking out. **(DG)**

ERI YAMAMOTO – DUOLOGUE



Label: AUM Fidelity

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Thank You; Conversation; Subway Song; Circular Movement; Violet Sky; Midtown Blues; Muse; You Are Welcome

Personnel: Eri Yamamoto: piano/composer, in duo(logue) with Federico Ughi: drums (tracks 1 & 8); Daniel Carter: alto sax (track 2), tenor sax(track 5); William Parker: bass (tracks 3 & 7); Hamid Drake: frame drum (tracks 4 & 6)

Eri Yamamoto's appearance on CD is always welcome and, for my money, the Japanese pianist has emerged as one of the most interesting and rewarding exponents of her instrument over the last few years.

The courteously named titles of this set are redolent of the amiable nature of this collection of duos with bassist William Parker, saxophonist Daniel Carter, drummer Federico Ughi and Hamid Drake working wonders with his frame drum. With so many of today's piano players coming out of the Bill Evans/Keith Jarrett school, Yamamoto is becoming a distinct voice herself and there is a sense of authenticity in

her playing which marks her out as someone capable of immediately grasping the mettle.

Each guest is allotted two duos and the record is bookended by collaborations with Frederico Ughi. The opening track is called “Thank you” and sounds like it has strayed from William Parker’s “Luc’s Lantern,” the trio album where Yamamoto first came to the attention of most jazz fans. Previously unknown to me, Ughi doesn’t disappoint and there is clearly a significant degree of understanding between the pair on this march-like composition. Typical of the whole of this disc, nothing is over-played and this very much comes across as a series of respectful discussions between close friends. On their second duet called “You are welcome”, Yamamoto almost tips her hat towards Les McCann with an immediately catchy theme underscored with the skipping brushwork. Whilst the pianist ploughs a pretty much free-ish approach to her improvisation, the music remains extremely accessible and this track will definitely get the toes tapping.

The more typical improvised fair is provided in the duos with Daniel Carter who uses both alto and tenor saxophones. Of the two, “Violet Sky” recalls the ballads of John Coltrane – albeit Carter has a much lighter approach to his tone and rhythm. Fans of improvised music will also no doubt approve of the track where he switches to alto (“Conversation”) which is easily the most abstract of all the recordings on this disc where the performances seem tailored to the optimum duration.

As good as these two collaborations are, it is the work with her erstwhile employer William Carter and Hamid Drake where the level of creativity goes up several notches. “Subway Song” sounds like one of the Ellington riffs he used to so readily toss off and this track illustrates just how hard a swinging bassist Parker is. The bass lines take some odd twists and turns ensuring that this track is steered away from complacency and, if anything, contrive to push the pianist in some interesting territory. This is a great duo and their next collaboration on the ballad “Muse” once more recalls their more hymnal work together on the “Luc’s Lantern” disc. There is no more beautiful track that this absolute gem on this record.

The final set of duos sees Hamid Drake set aside his full drum kit and get out his frame drum which he was so frequently demonstrated to be able to bring out a huge range of colour. Whilst “Circular Movement” brings out the exotic in the two musicians and demonstrates the almost incredulous possibilities that Drake coaxes out of this percussion instrument, the infectious “Midtown Blues” is the highlight of the disc. The theme is immediately memorable and once more Yamamoto recalls Duke Ellington, this time with a rocking rhythm not too dissimilar to one of his train inspired pieces. For four minutes and twenty-five seconds,

this track fizzes along and you can imagine the pure enjoyment they must have had playing this. This is one of those tracks that you feel the need to press the re-play button once it has finished.

I must admit that I love this unassuming record that manages to balance the adventurous with some great tunes. Throughout the history of jazz piano, there have been performers with an unerring ability to get to the nitty-gritty from the off. Rather like a contemporary Mal Waldron in her style and approach, Eri Yamamoto deserves to be better known and “Duologue” offers an ideal recording to get acquainted with her work. Recommended. *(Ian Thumwood)*

YXIMALLOO – UNPOP



Label: ESP Disk

Release Date: November 2008

Tracklist: Peter Is Back; Linie Voezo; Lav, Success & Helth; Watabokkuri # 2; The Poete; Hamberged Angel; A Slice of Darkness; Any Sense; Slick Hands; Sex & Sushi # 1; There Is A Mountain (Donovan); Puja; Samui Shibuja; Plowed Land; Trail; Qabala # 1; Big Man; Person to Person; Full It Up; Art of War; Juju Lul; Men On Corner; Necro Man; Watabokkuri # 2

Personnel: Yximalloo: Dell Latitude c 600; Chris Manz: Piano (track # 16)

According to Unpop's liner notes Yximalloo has, since the early 1980s, been the project of an unassuming Japanese man with a taste for The Beatles, Cliff Richard and 1920s Greek music. Whether this motley assortment can be considered 'influences' on the sound of Yximalloo is anyone's guess – the music itself bears little discernible relation to any of them (unless, of course, Cliff Richard released an album of glitchy beats and electronic bleeps which somehow went unnoticed). The title of his 1982 album 'Kitsch Shaman' may give a slightly better idea of what's on offer – tribal-esque quasi-dance rhythms made using all manner of trashy cheap-synth beats and sound effects. Still, one wouldn't know that Yximalloo sounded like this from hearing the opening track, 'Peter Is Back', which is of a rather different character to the majority of 'Unpop' – it's something of a deconstructed blues song, with a fragment of a typical twelve-bar riff being alternated with synth-derived xylophone-like sounds, whilst childlike voices inform us, naturally, that 'Peter's Back'.

After this seemingly false introduction we encounter Yximalloo proper, on a piece called 'Linie Voezo' – it opens with bizarre unaccompanied vocals straining out stilted phrases, before the entry of a rhythmic pattern made up of seemingly random, synthetic sounds – buzzes, scratches, whirrs and so on. Eventually the vocal line returns and it becomes apparent that the piece is a 'song', of sorts: it feels like a dance or pop track stripped of melody, harmony and the use of instruments in a conventional sense, so that we are left with only a skeletal beat and the incomprehensible intonations of the 'kitsch shaman'. In that sense, 'Peter Is Back' was no false start – it simply demonstrated what may be the core principle of Yximalloo's music: chopping up and stripping down the familiar (whether twelve-bar blues or pop songs or dance rhythms), thereby reducing the music to a core of roboticized, alien beats.

At it's most effective, Yximalloo's approach shares something with other essentially amelodic, rhythm-dominated electronic music – Autechre, perhaps, or 'electric' Miles Davis - the rapid, shifting rhythms on 'Necro Man', for instance, recall the hyper-speed drum-machine bursts which occasionally enter on 'Dark Magus' (an album which, perhaps not coincidentally, was originally released only in Japan). Yximalloo's glitch-dominated approach also has elements in common with the noise of fellow countrymen like Merzbow, except that Yximalloo isn't concerned with noise for noise's sake – rather, non-musical elements are employed to create identifiable (occasionally even danceable) rhythms that are characterised by repetition.

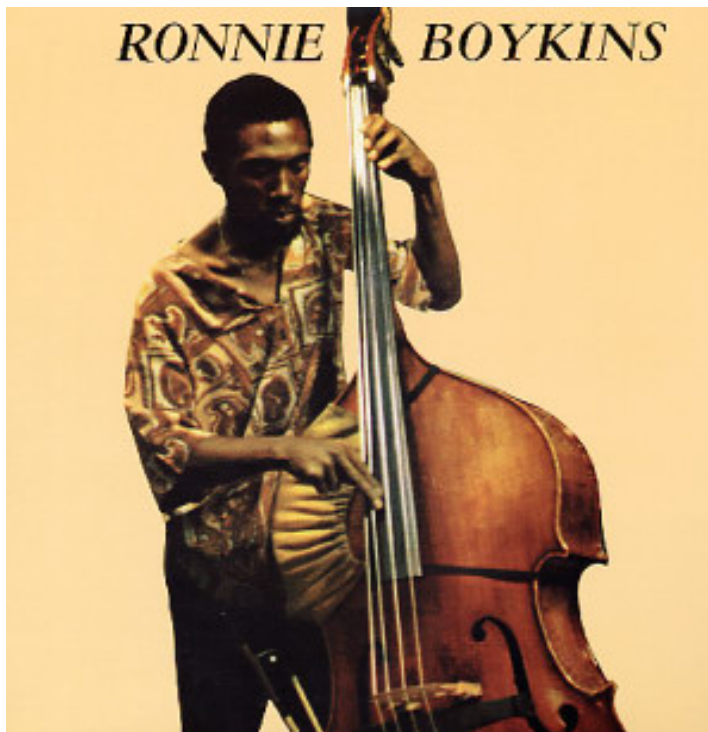
Again, Yximalloo retains an audible connection to dance and pop music – something obvious in a track like 'Any Sense' which relies on a

simple pumping bass-snare pattern used in countless other electronic dance tracks. This can make for some fairly mindless and banal, even irritating, music – at several points over the course of ‘Unpop’'s 24 tracks (which total nearly 70 minutes) I felt as though I were being subjected to a series of indistinguishable variations on the same basic piece; the most memorable moments were those that broke totally from the Yximalloo sound - notably the sudden, unexpected appearance of Sun-Ra-esque jazz piano on ‘Trial’. There are, however, are a few standout tracks where the predominant rhythmic approach is put to more effective use, such as the aforementioned ‘Necro Man’, or the afro-futurist polyrhythms of ‘Big Man’, which reminded me of the start of ‘Rain Dance’ from Herbie Hancock’s ‘Sextant’.

‘Unpop’, an album that, in general, suffers from being overlong, unvaried, and inconsistent, is thus not without its moments of interest. It would be intriguing to hear Yximalloo’s work from the early 1980s – if it sounds anything like this more recent offering it would surely have to be considered ‘ahead of its time’, for whatever that’s worth. As it is, in 2010 this approach is hardly new – though as far as pop (or rather ‘unpop’) goes I’d take this over yet more 19 - - s (insert decade here) revivalism any day. **(Daniel Larwood)**

RE-ISSUES

RONNIE BOYKINS – *THE WILL COME, IS NOW*



Label: ESP Disk

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: The Will Come, Is Now; Starlight at the Wonder Inn; Demon's Dance; Dawn is Evening, Afternoon; Tipping on Heels; The Third I

Personnel: Ronnie Boykins: bass & sousaphone; Joe Ferguson: soprano and tenor sax, flute; Monty Waters: alto and soprano sax; James Vass: alto and soprano sax, flute; Daoud Haroom: trombone; Art Lewis: drums, percussion; George Avaloz: congas

Additional Information: Recorded 1975; engineered by Marzette Watts

The only solo recording by Sun Ra bassist Ronnie Boykins, 'The Will Come, Is Now' has something in common with the 'spiritual', Afrocentric jazz of the period, as well as harking back to earlier styles, and it demonstrates lessons learned from Ra, with a collective approach that sees all the musicians doubling on percussion and mixes tightly-arranged grooves and compositional material with plenty of space for individual soloing. The title track is a near-13-minute piece built around Boykins' steady, percussion-complemented, groove. It's followed by a ballad feature for his arco bass with a melody that comes very close to a Mingus tune; in sound, it harks back to late 50s and early 60s jazz, Boykins taking on the role of a saxophone soloist gliding over the swooning interjections of the horns, his deep and sonorous bowed tone imparting familiar-sounding melodic contours with a slow-paced elegance. The jovial melody of 'Demon's Dance' gives way to a collective improvisation in which the horns pursue separate melodic lines, honking, shrilling, and spinning out intertwining be-bop licks. 'Tipping on Heels' opens with an unexpected burst of old-fashioned swing jazz, big-band style, and the collective solos that ensue have the joyous flavour of the improvised ensemble playing in classic New Orleans jazz, with brightly-pitched soprano saxophones taking the place of trumpets and clarinets. A conga solo connects this with African roots. We might compare this approach to that of Archie Shepp on 'Mama too Tight' or to Mingus on numerous recordings: encompassing roots and futures in a historically-aware but living and flowing music.

What's most striking about 'The Will Come, Is Now', is the great attention paid to texture throughout: listen to the way Boykin's bass vamp blends with the low-toned percussion on the opening track, giving the music a real low-end rhythmic force, or to the sparse and spooky opening of 'Dawn is Evening, Afternoon', with eerie conga moans timed to create just the right unsettling effect, and an alto melody imparted with an almost desperate fragility before a sudden switch to invigorating up-tempo soloing; listen to the way individual instruments emerge to solo over the dense, heavy percussion of 'The Third I', Boykins' growling sousaphone contrasting with the more lilting high timbre of flute and the more piercing high timbre of soprano sax. If not a record of great surprises, 'The Will Come, Is Now', remains a very fine listen. **(DG)**

**BOBBY BRADFORD WITH JOHN STEVENS & THE SPONTANEOUS
MUSIC ENSEMBLE**

BOBBY BRADFORD
with JOHN STEVENS



and the Spontaneous Music Ensemble

Label: Nessa

Tracklist: CD One: His Majesty Louis; Bridget's Mother; Room 408; Tolerance/To Bob;
CD Two: Trane Ride/ Ornette-Ment/ Doo-Dee; Norway; Rhythm Piece; Fragment

Personnel: Bobby Bradford: trumpet; Bob Norden: trombone; Trevor Watts: alto and soprano saxophone; Julie Tippetts: voice and guitar; Ron Herman: bass; John Stevens: drums, percussion and voice

Not entirely a re-issue, as some of this double album has never been released in any format before. But notable all the same.

Notable as a rare meeting between two musical worlds, remarkable in themselves, which were not in the habit of meeting at the time of recording (1971). Bobby Bradford, a member of the rather neglected Californian contingent of the *new thing*, who played but did not record with Ornette Coleman in the early 1960s just after Don Cherry's departure, and John Stevens, later to be known for his ubiquitous and wide-ranging approaches to musics of all kinds from fusion with *Away* to the non-jazz, non-idiomatic free improvisations with Derek Bailey. But despite sharing a fair bit of common ground musically, at this stage there had been little interaction between the U.S. 'avant-garde' and the diverse British improvising scene which had been growing since the mid 1960s.

The emphasis, as the listener might expect, is on interaction of what Evan Parker sometimes calls the 'close listening' kind. The opener is the track which has something most resembling a 'head' in the sense of a well-defined piece of thematic material played at the beginning and end of a piece, usually by the whole band. (Like the other tracks it is credited to a composer.) But the improvisation is truly collective, which accentuates the Armstrong (New Orleans) connection, apart from the elegiac tribute from one trumpet player to another.

The compositions may have nominal composers, but there is nowhere much evidence of the straight ahead foregrounding of a soloist playing lines or runs 'above' a rhythm section. A constant dialogue is in play, with musicians either 'agreeing' by following each other, as Bradford and Watts do for a while at the beginning of *Trane ride*, or by complementing each other less dependently, as in *Tolerance*, where long, keening notes from horns and voice are juxtaposed with a stop-time section from bass and drums. Motifs are developed collectively almost like a 'pass' in some ball game; pace, momentum, dynamics, density are all varied so that it is as far removed as possible from the 'power' kind of free jazz on one hand, and drifting space music on the other, but does achieve a compositional kind of expressive continuum.

There is plenty of give and take, toing and froing to such an extent that all the musicians do not play on every track. *Rhythm piece* is almost entirely voice, bass and drums, *Bridget's mother* is all horns and voice. This last number, plus *Norway*, which is without drums and trombone, seem to stem from Stevens' workshop exercise known as 'drones', where all concerned concentrated on sustaining notes as long as possible, while *Rhythm piece* bears some relation to the exercise known as 'pips' where the shortest possible notes are played. Special mention should be made of Julie Tippetts' role, not just as a vocalist who uses the voice instrumentally, at which she compares favourably to her contemporaries, Maggie Nicols and Norma Winstone, but at the way her voice is on equal terms with the horns, reacting and helping to shape the music's development. There is a particularly seamless blend of voice and horns on *Norway*, where it is almost impossible to tell them apart.

Bradford recorded again with Stevens and Watts two years later in the company of Kent Carter. The results can heard on *Love's dream* (Emanem), music deserving close attention.

Martin Davidson should be thanked for making so much of SME's music available on his Emanem label. The album reviewed here may not be quite so radical as *Frameworks* or *Quintessence*, but with *Oliv*, *Karyobin* and other albums reaching the 'hen's teeth' category of rarity, it is a valuable and engaging addition to the readily available SME discography. (**Sandy Kindness**)

BYARD LANCASTER – *PERSONAL TESTIMONY*



Label: Porter Records

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: (Then – 1979) Miss Nikki; In Lovingkindness; Dogtown; Hoodoo; Brotherman; What A Friend We Have in Jesus; Marianne and Alicia; Brian; Mind Exercise/ (Now – 2007) Prayer Cry; Tribalize Lancaster; Afro-Ville; Free Mumia; Global Key; Loving You

Personnel: Byard Lancaster: voice, piano, flute, piccolo, bass clarinet, soprano & alto sax, percussion

Additional Information: Tracks 1-9 released as 'Personal Testimony' on Lancaster's Concert Artists record label in 1979. Tracks 10-15 are new pieces recorded by Lancaster especially for this re-issue (entitled 'Personal Testimony: Then & Now').

Having released a very fine group recording by the Byard Lancaster Unit ('Live at Macalester College', reviewed in Issue 2 of 'eartrip'), Porter Records have now decided to re-issue a solo recording in which Lancaster, best known as an alto sax player, demonstrates his capabilities on a wide variety of instruments. 'Personal Testimony', the original nine-track album, is supplemented on this issue by five new recordings from 2007 – not quite enough material to make an entire new album, but a significant addition nonetheless. The 1979 recordings feature Lancaster on saxophone, bass clarinet and flute; the newer recordings are mainly Lancaster on flute, piano and various bits of percussion, with the occasional use of voices as well. Most of the tracks are dedicated to various people and places of personal significance to Lancaster: one of the new pieces is for Mumia Abu-Jamal, and there are songs for family, loved ones, and for the community – Lancaster, a community activist, has done much to bring jazz music to Philadelphia.

On 'Exactemente', a 1974 release with percussionist Keno Speller, Lancaster plays a very fine piano solo, full of rhapsodic scales and chords, and 'Miss Nikki' has a similar vibe, with overdubbed sung and whispered vocals adding just the hint of R&B ballad. 'In Lovingkindess' has the gentle feel of Lancaster's composition 'Last Summer' (featured on both the Macalester recording and what is probably Lancaster's best-known album, 'It's Not Up To Us', featuring guitarist Sonny Sharrock). Reverberant flutes hover, melodically intertwine, and swoop up to high, tongued exclamations. The flute and piccolo of 'Dogtown' are more strident, building shrill eddies and cascades of sound from the funky melodic line. 'Hoodoo', for soprano sax, is the first track not to featured overdubbing; it has a gospel flavour, combining a laid back, lazy-afternoon feel with a quietly passionate melodicism. 'Brotherman' mines the rich textural combination of overdubbed bass clarinets: breathy and sinuous, they pursue simple scalar patterns which hover around long, held tones. As more active improvised lines start to emerge, the piece loses none of its warm, hazy quality. The gospel tinge heard on 'Hoodoo' emerges fully on a straight alto rendition of 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus'. Rather than the Ayler-like vibrato one might expect, what emerges is much more metallic in sound, though with a certain softness in tone as the notes die away.

'Marianne and Alicia' emerges seamlessly from the last silence in the previous piece as alto and soprano intertwine around another supremely relaxed melody, with some vocalised tones and fast fingerwork on soprano contrasting with the alto's continued declamations of the theme. 'Brian' is an alto piece showing Lancaster's be-bop roots – not something you hear that much in his work, as he tended to be stereotyped as a free jazz player – while 'Mind Exercise', the original closing track of the album, hints at some sort of futuristic bent with the subtitle 'Complicated Planning 2030', and is an upper-register exercise in the vein of someone like Roscoe Mitchell. As Michael Cuscuna writes in his liner notes, players like Mitchell and Anthony Braxton, in their solo recitals, were taking the idea of the exercise, the study, focussing on a particular range or particular aspect of technique – such as the upper register – and transforming it into the basis of the whole piece. Such a commitment to technique was never, whatever its detractors might say, without 'soul', and it's this sense of unfussy sincerity which marks out Lancaster's playing on all the original 'Personal Testimony' tracks.

So to the 2007 recording: 'Prayer Cry, which is predominantly vocal, has a joyous, South-African flavour, as Lancaster alternates between loud screams and declamations and barely-audible whisperings and mutterings. The piece concludes with Lancaster blowing melodic counterpoint on flute to a tape of a traditional African performance.

'Tribalize Lancaster' continues the feel with melodic flute over softly pattering percussion. Despite the up-tempo emphasis, the feel of almost spaced-out calm that suffuses the 1979 recordings is also present here, as Lancaster's languid spoken vocals drift over overdubbed flutes on 'Afro-Ville' and the perkier 'Free Mumia.' 'Global Key' – which, at about seven minutes long, is the longest of the new pieces – is built around rippling piano textures, with a dreamy feel induced by assorted interjections from flutes, voice and percussion and thumb piano. A rumbling, more dissonant central section flows back into a calm conclusion. 'Loving You', with Lancaster picking out chords under his own flute melodies, and singing softly, almost to himself, provides a mellow conclusion. While the 1979 date overall has more variety, there's something nicely personal about the later tracks, the spoken and sung portions giving the impression that what are clearly carefully thought-through performances have been tossed off in a quiet hour, drifting out of an open window on a mellow afternoon. Fans of Lancaster's work, and those seeking an accessible, varied solo recording, should certainly enjoy this release. **(DG)**

THE REVOLUTIONARY ENSEMBLE –VIETNAM



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Vietnam 1; Vietnam 2

Personnel: Jerome Cooper: percussion; Sirone: bass; Leroy Jenkins: violin

Additional Information: Recorded at the peace church. Originally released 1972.

A re-issue of the first recording by this superlative group, whose 'avant-chamber-jazz' approach seemed something of a rarity at the time, and still does so today, given the dominance of much more forceful instrumental line-ups (saxophone, trumpet, rhythm section, etc). In terms of small group work, you'd have to go back to the early 1960s trio of Paul Bley, Jimmy Giuffre and Steve Swallow for something comparable, and the Revolutionary Ensemble's music is very different to the crisp pointilism of that trio. Indeed, the term 'chamber jazz' may be somewhat misleading, suggesting a constraint which is nowhere present in the music itself; quite the contrary, in fact, for the inventive sweep of this performance in no way feels formal or staged. One might even argue that the one lengthy piece presented (split into two tracks for the LP release) is somewhat episodic. At least, one might argue that in theory; in practice, transitions are seamless and there's a total avoidance of the 'sawtooth' model of improvisation (rise to loud climax, subside, then rise again). Things vary from the variations-on-a-theme which opens the disc, to the lengthy mid-section, where the employment of long silences, punctuated by a distant harmonica, sits eerily against the loud, droning buzz which evidences imperfect recording quality (but which ends up forming another component to the music, in a serendipitous mesh). The music frequently stops as individual members of the group take solos, in which the focus becomes even more intense, moves to another level of concentration. Particularly at these moments, there's a real sense of being drawn into a sound world that matters, a necessary and wholly beguiling place.

Jenkins, as ever, plays the most exquisitely shaped lines with an ease and grace which belies the speed of thought required for such manoeuvres. Sirone, avoiding the temptations of walking bass or too much woody pizzicato, is just as happy forming a twin melodic strain to Jenkins' violin as he is falling into an accompanying role, or varying the texture by repeating a particularly notable phrase. Cooper's drumming is so subtle that it's to forget just how hard it must be to play alongside two stringed instruments; and, in a music that's as often about melodic flow as it is about the sort of propulsion normally associated with free jazz, he has the rhythmic subtlety and the instinctive understanding to contribute something to the texture without dominating it and without destroying the mood. And it's a mood (or series of moods) that's sustained throughout the album. Well worth hearing. **(DG)**

CHARLES TYLER – CHARLES TYLER ENSEMBLE



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: 2009

Tracklist: Strange Uhuru; Lacy's Out East; Three Spirits; Black Mysticism

Personnel: Charles Tyler: alto sax; Joel Friedman: cello; Charles Moffett: orchestra vibes (track 1); Henry Grimes: bass; Ronald (Shannon) Jackson: drums

Additional Information: Originally released 1966.

Charles Tyler, best known as a baritone player, displays a strikingly forceful alto tone on this, his debut album. Granted, this kind of free jazz setting is one where 'forceful tone' is par for the course, yet it seems to me that Tyler really does take things outer than out, to Ayler-like levels of vibrato-heavy intensity and scalding multiphonic shrieks, fully justifying Leroi Jones' comment, around the time, that "only Charles Tyler of the Ayler unit has the big wailing heavy alto sound that satisfies my particular need for flesh and blood."

In fact, Tyler doesn't play as much as might be expected, tending to state the melody and take a brief solo before leaving space for Joel Friedman, the other most dominant voice in the band, around whose

cello lines weave Charles Moffett's tinkling 'orchestra vibes' (sounding oddly and eerily child-like in such an avant context) and Henry Grimes' typically active bass. The combination of cello and bass is an interesting one, also to be found on the one date Gato Barbieri cut for ESP, 'In Search of the Mystery' (also recently re-issued by the label), where Sirone and Calo Scott are the musicians in question. This album is perhaps less claustrophobic than the Barbieri, less rhythmically static and less focussed on melodic improvisation – even when Friedman suggests folk-tinged modes with an Eastern European or Jewish flavour, Moffett's always prodding him onwards with sparkling fast runs. Thus, though sometimes the cello sounds like it's on the verge of smooth lyricism, the other musicians don't allow that to happen, pushing Friedman on instead to rough rhythmic scrapes and woozy slides around the instrument's high register. That said, Tyler's keening improvisation over arco strings when he re-enters the opening piece, 'Strange Uhuru', is far from orthodox 'fire music'. Much 60s free jazz abolished, or at least complicated, the sense of linear time engendered by the theme-solos-theme format of traditional jazz, often by speeding up the pulse to sustain a whirling, trance-like atmosphere, and Tyler does employ this approach at times, but, as on the aforementioned passage in 'Strange Uhuru', his ensemble is also capable of slowing almost to a stop: a different kind of suspension, with a much more mysterious and muted atmosphere. In large part this is due to Ronald Shannon Jackson (who'd played alongside Tyler in Albert Ayler's band) demonstrating a particularly sharp sense of his role in relation to the other group members, sometimes dropping out altogether, in order to allow the full colouristic implications of the unusual instrumental line-up to assert themselves. Of course, this being an ESP Disk, he does whip up plenty of jittering energy elsewhere – on the final track in particular, where Tyler really gets the chance to wail, playing super-fast runs and honk-tonguing clarion call after clarion call in a vicious, buzzing lower register. This is a fine recording all round. **(DG)**



BOOK REVIEWS

RICHARD WILLIAMS – *THE BLUE MOMENT: MILES DAVIS' KIND OF BLUE AND THE REMAKING OF MODERN MUSIC*



Publisher: Faber and Faber
Publication Date: 2009
Number of Pages: 309 (incl. index)

Contents: Introduction; Into the Blue; The Sound of Blue; Blue Moods; Blue Dawn; Six Colours (Blue); Interlude: Outside in Blue; The Blue Moment; Blue Waves; Blue Horizon; Dark Blue; So Blue; Blue Bells; Code Blue; Blue on Blue; Coda: Permanent Blue; References; Acknowledgments; Index

So here we have yet another book on Miles Davis, and one which deals, furthermore, with the album forced to bear the weight of the history of an entire music (and, by association, all of its dependent and shaping contexts) – a task for which *no* one album is suited. But Richard Williams promises something different: an attempt to analyse just what it was about ‘Kind of Blue’ that made such an impact, and how this impact was felt among listeners and among other musicians, rather than simply another case of reinforcing its mystique as a ‘great’ art object, as a fifty-year old talisman overshadowing all which comes after.

That said, about half the book is a history of Davis’ career in the years leading up to and including ‘Blue’; something Ashley Kahn’s book of a few years ago had already done, as Williams acknowledges in his introduction. Once we get past the description of the actual album itself, and the recording circumstances surrounding it, Williams seems to feel liberated into the more broadly contextual element which is, at least partly, the book’s *raison d’être*, and proceeds to digress into a more sweeping survey of 1960s drone-influenced music (the minimalism of Young, Riley, Reich and its incursion into the rock music world via the Velvet Underground). This would seem to relate more to Davis’ similarly Indian-influenced late 60s and early 70s work (‘In a Silent Way’, ‘Orange Lady’ and ‘He Loved Him Madly’) rather than to ‘Blue’ – though of course Davis had had at least some influence in terms of the modal music freedom and the impressionist atmosphere of the introduction to ‘So What’.

The problem here is making any one album a template, a talismanic object, when actually, for the players, it was just another recording session. This is part of a tendency to make the music static, to make it live on in a series of marketable artefacts rather than to develop and grow in a live, organic context, and is particularly ironic given Davis’ refusal ever to stand still in his career, and given the fact that Williams is trying to chart a series of changes and developments sparked by the initial album. Perhaps, though, Williams is simply writing the way that many listeners actually do and did experience music such as Davis’; those who have missed catching the live act through a combination of money and circumstance. Indeed, he notes that “creative musicians are often justifiably suspicious of the way their listeners invest emotional capital in specific recordings...From such an instinctive affection can come the urge to force an artist to stop, to freeze his or her work at a certain time, the time best suited to our own needs. The artist, moving

on, does not necessarily see it that way.” But if, then, this book is an attempt to capture something of the actual listening experience, rather than existing simply as an ‘objective’, detached chronicle or history of what happened in 1959 and after, it falls short on topics which could easily have been discussed, surrounding the commercial aspects of modern musical production and consumption and the economic and political circumstances so vitally a part of the ‘jazz music’ of which ‘Kind of Blue’ is taken to be the supreme representative.

A chapter, tellingly described as ‘Interlude’, in which Williams briefly treats of the existentialist/cool outsider milieu of the 1950s (Camus, Moravia, Mastroianni and Strand cigarettes), is on the right track, but seems rather unfocussed, a journalist’s collection of quotations and generalising statements. Which is why the book is best when Williams simply describes the music – he’s a critic with a fine prose style, even if his use of the buzz-words ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’ too often goes unchecked – or collects revealing quotations from, in particular, Brian Eno and Terry Riley.

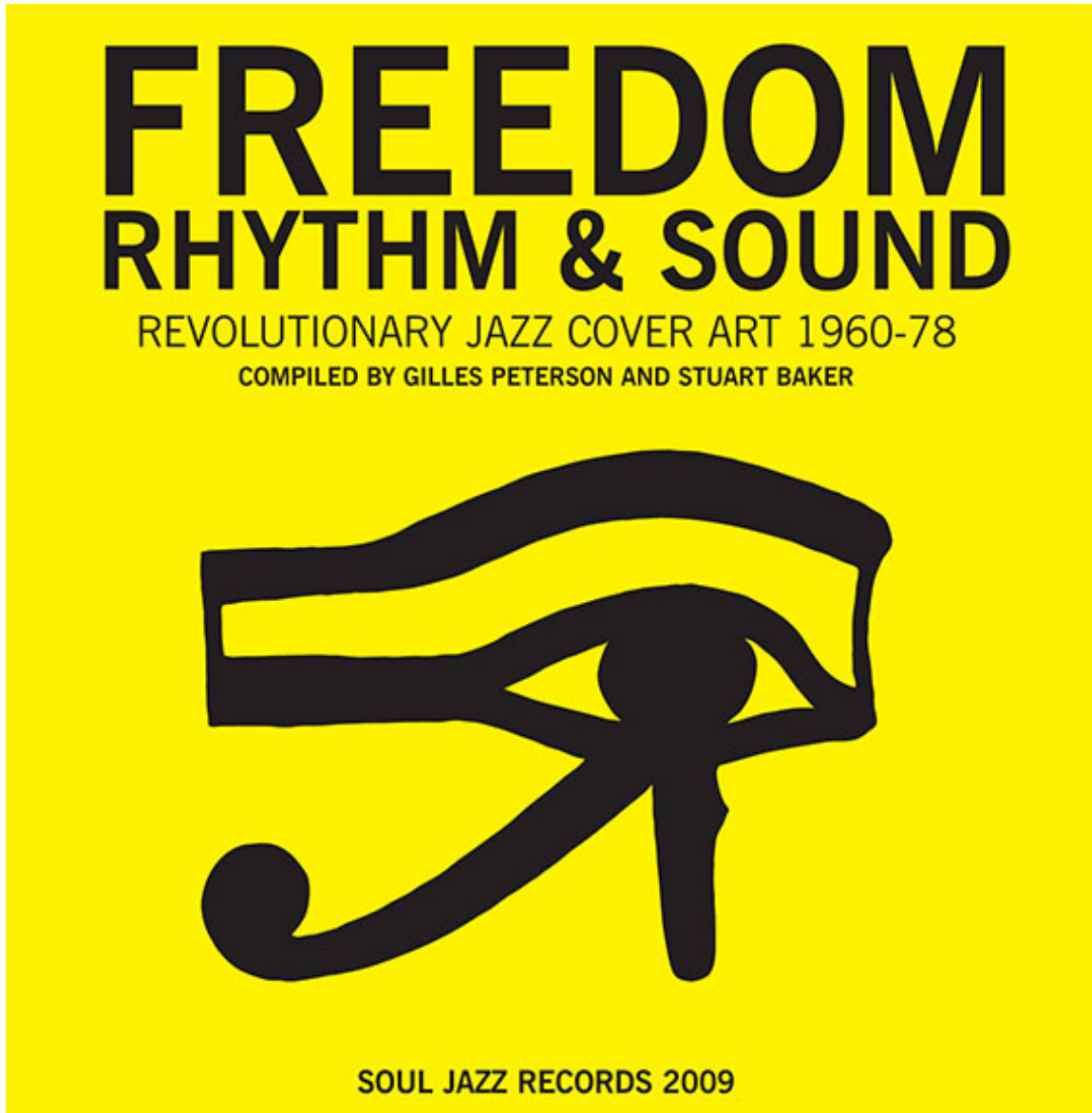
I think perhaps the problem is that, too often, he seems uncomfortable with thematic or theoretical analysis (by the latter, I don’t mean a narrowly musicological approach, but one which is willing to address the ‘wider issues’ relating to the music with more than token or sweeping gestures). Thus, we are presented with tantalising hints at areas which almost open up into more extended investigation, but which then sink back again as chronology takes over. For instance, the opposition between the expression of ‘innerness’ and of a more collective spirit: here, Williams turns in a nice description of Coltrane’s soloing as the “public expression of an inner quest,” but goes no further. Or, another opposition, between ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ approaches to jazz (though in some ways this was falsely set up: Davis, so often taken as the supreme ‘cool’, mid-register trumpeter, began to increasingly utilise a fierce, brash upper-register approach as the 60s wore on; ‘introspective’ Bill Evans turns in a particularly energetic performance on George Russell’s ‘Concerto for the Billy the Kid’; and even Stan Getz could be more than mellow.) And, perhaps connected to this, the opposition between African and European approaches (the legacy of which becomes increasingly apparent in the ideological debates over the ‘New Thing’, or one’s critic injunction to Anthony Braxton: “stop Messiaen around”). Witness Coltrane’s presence on ‘Kind of Blue’: one solo was described as “angry” in a Down Beat review (which Williams quotes in full), and this perhaps because it did not conform to a notion of western ‘elegance’, of ‘fine craftsmanship’ and clear structure (whereas Davis’ pithiness and strong melodicism leant itself much more obviously to that model). Indeed, as Coltrane’s playing developed, non-western influences became

increasingly apparent, whether these be African (the rhythmic propulsion and emotive, non-standard instrumental cries on 'Africa,' from the 'Africa-Brass' sessions), or Indian (both in terms of timbre, instrumental colour, and raga-like length). And we musn't forget Davis' later, more formally adventurous and 'aggressive'-sounding 1970s work, where James Brown (Africa, via the USA) met India (sitars, tables), drum choirs (see Ian Carr's analysis in his Miles biography), *and* Stockhausen (whose own 'western art-music' was profoundly influenced by the music and philosophy of non-western cultures; witness 'Stimmung' or 'Ceylon/Bird of Passage'). Such experimentation suggests some kind of synthesis between the oppositions sketched above – or, rather, a world where oppositions between different musical cultures are not erased, but remain in some sense sublimated, cultural elements mixing together while the remaining traces of opposition between them generate a creative tension that contributes enormously to the music's dark and disturbing quality.

But Williams does not really raise the issue at all; all we get are the usual anecdotes about Davis being impressed by a performance of African dance and the assertions that Bill Evan's playing demonstrated the influence of Ravel, Debussy, et al. At times, this sort of thing feels like a kind of avoidance; as if Williams holds himself back when he thinks he might be digging too deep. Thus, one could even see 'Kind of Blue' as leading to free jazz or improv, given its expansion of tonality, form and time (most explicitly in the Evans/Chambers introduction to 'So What'), and its move as a whole away from be-bop constrictions and emphasis on technical virtuosity, to laying stress on an overall *sound*, a collective construction. Yet, if anything, Williams *contrasts* it with free jazz, making instead the much easier connection to ECM atmospherics and to minimalism's return to simple tonality – though he conveniently forgets that Davis himself was less interested in endlessly rehashing melancholy ballads than in adopting an approach which fore-grounded powerful rhythms, overlain with dissonant, aggressive, effects-laden guitars and keyboards. Indeed, Williams does little to counter the usual criticism of ECM when he argues that Manfred Eicher did not create "a bloodless Europeanisation of jazz" because the label's catalogue contained work by Don Cherry, The Art Ensemble of Chicago, Wadada Leo Smith and Charles Lloyd alongside the usual suspects: Garbarek, Jarrett, et al. Which simply makes it sound as if most of the music *is* bloodless, but that that's OK, because there's a bit of free jazz there too – which doesn't address the accusation of a generalised bloodlessness, exceptions granted. (Indeed, Lloyd's work on ECM often *conforms* to the stereotype – 'Lift Every Voice', despite its claims to be a response to 9/11 (or perhaps because of them) remains muted to the point of ennui-inducement.)

The book ends on a description of a visit to La Monte Young's Dream House, which is fine in itself (reading like a well-written newspaper report), but which has nothing to do with Davis or 'Kind of Blue'; and Williams does not even attempt to make the connection. It's typical of the way the book comes increasingly to feel like several Guardian articles stitched together, with maybe a few sentences on Davis or 'Kind of Blue' to keep the thread going: they're decent articles in themselves, but the real work – the task of drawing together thematic areas and expanding beyond the usual chronological histories of what are, after all, pretty well-discussed topics – is left undone. Consequently, 'The Blue Moment' is not as incisive as it could have been. **(DG)**

STUART BAKER/ GILLES PETERSON – *FREEDOM, RHYTHM & SOUND: REVOLUTIONARY JAZZ COVER ART 1965-83*



Publisher: SJR (Soul Jazz Records) Publishing
Publication Date: 2009
Number of Pages: 179

While coffee-table jazz books are common, coffee-table free jazz books are understandably less so; come to think of it, 'Freedom, Rhythm and Sound,' published by Soul Jazz Records (who have a good eye for design themselves), is probably the first of its kind. In terms of layout and appearance, the book is impeccable: a large hard-back, with a striking cover of stark black letters on a bright yellow background; glossy pages; unobtrusive text nestling next to and underneath carefully-arranged pictures; and image upon image, page after page – a wide and eclectic selection of the cover art to better and lesser-known albums. For those whose shelves are crammed with original LPs, or those who have become almost unconsciously familiar with these sorts of designs through trawling out-of-print music blogs, many of the images will be recognizable. But seeing them all together in one place, as one can with this book, crystallizes a sense of continuity and thematic unity which can only enhance one's appreciation for these record covers as works of art in their own right, not simply pretty or arresting wrapping for the aural treasures within the record sleeve.

That said, such a glossy work does reflect the way in which any image can become assimilated into a process of production and consumption – which embraces free jazz and its radical socio-political/religious roots as simply a lifestyle choice, radical chic to hang up on the wall. Aware of this, Stuart Baker's text provides context through a brief introduction outlining the history of free jazz, and potted biographies of various key figures, scattered throughout the book. Unfortunately, this tends to be information which could be gleaned from a quick internet search and which is basic at best, touching on ideological and political issues rather fleetingly (a one-sentence quotation from the Black Panthers, mention of Amiri Baraka and John Coltrane) and preferring to concentrate on the safer factual approach – 'in 1971, so-and-so moved to Paris' – which is the jazz critic's preferred domain. The text therefore comes across as a rather cursory run-through of all the relevant sources and pieces of information; it reads like something put together competently, but not very enthusiastically, for an exhibition catalogue.

Furthermore, considering the fact that this is a book about the cover art of these records, it might have been nice to have some writing about the art itself. While Baker's introduction does hint at the DIY ethos that was so vital to much of this music in the third paragraph to his introduction, he doesn't return to the theme. Furthermore, what he does say in this section contains a number of assumptions which could have

done with being addressed. Take this sentence: “For reasons of economy, the artwork is often strikingly raw – many were starkly black and white, with hand-drawn graphics and simple typesetting – a million miles away from the slick presentation of jazz by the mainstream music industry.”. What of the artwork that isn’t ‘raw’? What of the careful design of Mtume’s ‘Alkebu-Lan’: black-and-white and hand-drawn, but by no means crude? What of the use of photography? For instance, we often see shots of artists, alone or in groups, in urban and natural wastelands, striking a keen balance between careful, posed composition (Joe McPhee’s ‘Nation Time’) and off-the-cuff, spontaneous document (on Noah Howard’s Judson Hall recording, some of the artists are looking towards the camera, while others continue their conversation in the background, apparently oblivious to the photographer’s presence). There might be something to consider in the contrast between posed, studio shots and quick location set-ups – although this was a contrast already blurred by classic jazz photography, where the illusion of a smoky glamour, originating as a record of what jazz clubs looked like, was steadily manipulated into a commercial and conventional image: saxophonists shown playing their instruments with cigarettes between their fingers, or, later, blowing hard with their eyes closed in passion (Braxton’s ‘sweating brow’ syndrome, perhaps). Given this, the sharp distinction Baker draws between ‘raw, DIY, handmade’ free jazz art and “the slick presentation of jazz by the mainstream music industry” feels too simple (even if he does attempt to cover himself with the qualifying words “often” and “many”). The analogy between free and spontaneous music and free and spontaneous art elides the fact that the music didn’t just happen, ‘just like that’: it was the process of long searches, long periods of study, long processes of thought, and the product of particular historical developments and struggles which should not be reduced to simplified clichés. There has been debate in free improv circles recently about the role played by the physical object, by the aesthetic appeal of having a record which one can hold in one’s hand and look at, as well as listen to. One might argue that to have something which looks appealing in this way is not ideologically suspect, is not collusion with commercialism or with the mainstream music industry. In fact, it’s quite the opposite: placed against a world of endlessly-exchangeable commodities, here is evidence that something is worthy of the time and effort required to produce a beautiful, individual object, something that has been crafted and shaped with close attention to its material and ideological qualities.

If we accept that such objects are worthy of respect and study – as the publishers of this anthology must do, to have produced a book devoted to these album covers – we must also accept that their creators should also be accorded with more than a name-check. Sure, we see

names in the credits below the images– painters, photographers, designers – but they remain simply names. Each of these people had their own story, their own involvement, their own ideology, their own contribution. For a book that honours their work, would it not have made sense to honour those that made it?

It's hard, then, not to feel that an opportunity or several have been missed here. Visual art is, after all, an element of the free jazz movement which never receives much attention, yet it is undoubtedly a part of the aesthetic appeal of the music. Like it or not, a record sleeve is identified in the listener's mind with the music it contains – and this arguably still the case, even in the age of multiple downloads nestling on a hard drive as cover-less MP3s. (Hence devoting an entire book to album covers.)

Baker, Gilles Peterson (his fellow compiler) and the publishers have clearly put a lot of work into gathering together information for the book, and a lot of work in putting it together in an aesthetically pleasing way; furthermore, as the list of acknowledgements shows, they have sought out permission from a number of artists and labels to use the images included. It would surely not have been hard for them also to have commissioned an essay by an art historian or some other writer with some knowledge of the time period – or to have contacted some of the cover artists themselves, interviewing them, gleaning some information about the processes which went into creating the covers. This writer, or these writers, could have analyzed differences and similarities between designs, could have analyzed the role of the musicians themselves in putting things together (many artists have a design credit to their name). For instance, we are not told that the covers of the various Don Cherry records are tapestries by his wife Moki, their use of tapestry with motifs from non-western cultures, simplified forms, and unusual colour schemes all making a conscious break from the black-and-white, smoky aesthetic of Blue Note or Birdland.

And then we might ask: what about the role of 'wacky' psychedelic images – inverted colours, distorted photographs, Bridget Riley-esque swirls and abstract patterns? How does that fit into the current of the times? Is it merely superficial decoration, or does it have something more to offer? What about the use of group photographs as a statement of collective identity (as opposed to the fetishisation of one particular musician as the 'star' of the band, whose image alone adorns the records)? What about comparisons with more mainstream jazz covers? – for instance, Miles Davis' placing of black faces (his and Cicely Tyson's) on 'Sorcerer' and 'Nefertiti,' having objected so strongly to the photo of a yacht-bound white woman slapped onto the front of 'Miles Ahead', and moving away from the cover of 'Porgy and Bess', where a female hand

stroking a trumpet reinforces the black sexual stereotypes associated with jazz. Or the gorgeous super-imposed face effect on 'Filles de Kilimanjaro'; the psychedelic colour-shape of 'Miles in the Sky'; and the Mati Klarwein cover art to 'Bitches' Brew' and 'Live-Evil', Klarwein's use of African figures and transforming, liquid landscapes reflected in the painting on the front of Sun Ra's 'The Nubians of Plutonia' (the Impulse re-issue). The 60s and 70s may have been a time when a sense of the 'spiritual' often spilled over into incoherent babble and superficial bullshit – everyone was peppering their work with symbols and allusions – but there are clear ideological messages at work in the free jazz designs which mark them out as more purposeful than mere hippie paraphernalia (though there may be an element of that as well). Explanations of the significance behind the symbols and objects that appear again and again – idols, pyramids, third eyes – would at least indicate that they were being taken seriously, rather than as mere fancy decoration.

The lack of any such analysis perhaps stems from the fact that 'Freedom Rhythm and Sound' has been put together in the manner of a CD compilation, gathering together rare material from various dusty corners in true record-collector fashion (Gilles Peterson is, after all, a true record-collector). Unfortunately, where the music on a compilation can be allowed to speak for itself – or has been spoken about in numerous books and articles which can be separately tracked down – the same cannot be said of this cover art. 'Freedom Rhythm and Sound' is, to my knowledge, the first book to pay attention to the visual aspects of free jazz records, and, while its regrettable that it didn't delve as far into things as it could have, its images do provide ample proof that this is very fertile territory for future explorers. **(DG)**

MATTIN & ANTHONY ILES (ed.) – NOISE & CAPITALISM

Publisher: Arteleku Audiolab (Kritika series), Donostia-San Sebastián (Gipuzkoa)

Publishing Date: September 2009

Number of Pages: 191

Contents: Anthony Iles – Introduction; Mattin – Going Fragile; Csaba Toth – Noise Theory; Edwin Prévost – Free Improvisation In Music and Capitalism: Resisting Authority and the Cults of Scientism and Celebrity; Ray Brassier – Genre is Obsolete; Bruce Russell – Towards a Social Ontology of Improvised Sound Work; Nina Power – Woman Machines: The Future of Female Noise; Ben Watson – Noise as Permanent Revolution or, Why Culture Is a Sow Which Devours its Own Farrow; Matthew Ryland – Company Work vs. Patrician Radiers; Matthieu Saladin – Points of Resistance & Criticism in Free Improvisation: Remarks on a Musical Practice and Some Economic Transformations; Howard Slater – Prisoners of the Earth Come Out! Notes towards 'War at the Membrane'; Mattin – Anti-Copyright: Why Improvisation & Noise Runs Against the Idea of Intellectual Property

Further Information: As well as the published edition, which can be obtained from Mattin's website (<http://mattin.org>) in exchange for live tapes, etc, the book can be downloaded as a free PDF from http://www.arteleku.net/audiolab/noise_capitalism.pdf

Cover by Emma (E), Martin (M) and Sara (S)

Noise & Capitalism

E: I was just thinking - what we've been talking about, I mean I've talked about it with you and with M, about the projection of you as the expert and, just in the first part where M says that the inside should be relatively neutral and the idea that for you, I would assume, or from what I know of other people who work with typography, the idea of design being neutral is a fiction.

M: Yes, yes.

E: But also there is an aim in design that it should be in some cases as undistracting as possible. So the idea is that something should be very easy to read and not distracting to the eye. I think it is an interesting challenge to think within the boundaries of the assignment that you have. The last time I spoke to you S,

you were saying that you weren't sure if this would work in relation to the assignment you've been given, because of the time, and the amount of time that you thought you needed, and the time that this would take.

M: Just one note, on neutrality, it's because of ignorance, I mean the whole thing is about experimental music so if you want to experiment with the format in any far out ways, total freedom, and excuse my ignorance.

E: I just think it's interesting that when we think about our own practice we would scrutinize the form and the means of production, but when we project to another person, engaged in another kind of practice, like design, we don't bring the same amount of critical thinking. But that's



KRITIKA



This is fantastic stuff. Of course, there is a smallish swarm of intellectual activity surrounding the sort of issues discovered here, but more often than not it centres on jazz and American practices. Consequently, discussions tend to get sidelined into the race issue – an issue which is crucial for the development of that music, but which can impose a narrowing of focus when one considers that much noise and free improvisation is created by non-African Americans who are not living in the particular historical context of a racially-oppressive society (though of course one with its own deep networks of imperialism, alienation, &c.). Serious intellectual examination of music, as practiced

by some of the journalists from *Wire* magazine, may also find itself restricted by the necessity of providing a review of a product (whether a live performance or an album) which evaluates that product on aesthetic grounds first and foremost – and whose audience may resist the presence of critical theory: too much politics for them to swallow, an ‘irrelevance’, intruding on their desire for a generalised ‘underground’ freedom to enjoy their niche of generalised musical resistance to the ‘mainstream’ (represented by such easy-target bogeymen as George Bush and...um, Britney Spears).

Not that these are the only intellectual examinations available: fine writing has emerged in recent years from David Borgo, whose book ‘Sync or Swarm’ approaches free improvisation from a primarily scientific perspective (applying fractal and swarm theory to the mental processes involved in making music in this manner), and in the e-pages of the online journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, whose numerous writers approach their topics from any number of different disciplines or models – feminism, queer theory, race, &c.

But this book is different from all that. (NB: refer to footnote before reading further.)¹ Yes, this book *is* different (in a really *useful* way), because its aim is to make politics just as much as its subject as music, and to see the two as fundamentally linked (hence the equal weighting – noise *and* capitalism).

As well being a fine performer, one of the few who really takes the notion of praxis seriously and attempts to apply it in everything he does, Mattin is a fine writer of manifestos, or manifesto-like pieces, one of which, ‘Going Fragile,’ follows the Introduction (and was previously – and is currently – available on his website). Here, he advocates an approach of risk-taking in free improvisation, resisting the trade-marking of one area of sonic activity or mode of approach and being open to those moments when failure seems most likely, when crisis prompts the human to be most resourceful. This idea of risk is a crucial one in the book as a whole – perhaps unsurprising given Mattin’s involvement. For instance, the cover consists of a transcript of a conversation between the three designers (one of whom is Mattin himself) as to how the binding might reflect ideological biases relating to the words within. Such a concern with the tiniest material details of production and their relation to socio-political issues might seem, to some, like overkill, but it is surely evidence of a very deep commitment and a rigorous refusal of easy realities and comforts, in the pursuit of a deeper and more complete sense of what it means to be human and to live in the modern world.

¹ Yes, the old reviewer’s tactic: lay out the product’s uniqueness and everyone will rush to get hold of it to satisfy some new thrill, just another object in the production line manufacturing desires and wants.

The collection's different authors have – healthily – different views on issues musical and political, even though they might be put broadly into the camp of leftist advocates of musical experimentation as a form of praxis: frequent reference points are Guy Debord and, perhaps more surprisingly, Karl Marx (whose popularity has slipped with the growing trend of politically-minded music critics to draw on post-modernist theory (witness the big hoo-hah over the music of Tricky, Burial, etc being a form of 'hauntology')).²

Eddie Prévost's essay treads lines familiar to those who have read his two full-length books, 'No Sound Is Innocent' and 'Minute Particulars', but remains a deft and succinct history lesson/ negotiation of positions. Prévost posits free improvisation as a practice which contains the possibility for a genuine social interaction (through music) which might evade the otherwise ever-present clutches of capitalist relations; an alternative system, something with the inkling of an alternative social reality (on which, see also George Lewis' 'A Power Stronger Than Itself', Mike Heffley's 'A Composed Theory of Free Improvisation', and Anthony Braxton's ongoing large-group projects in the field of Ghost Trance Music and Diamond Curtain Wall Music). Prévost is not arguing that free improvisation is some sort of utopian realm in which that alternative social reality can actually exist as a totality, for, as he admits: "[Free improvisation's] practitioners are not immune from the basic requirements of existence (within capitalism) which enables them to continue living. Certain material conditions have to be met before any music can be made." (p.41) Nonetheless, free improvisation remains a form (or, perhaps more accurately, process) in which unmediated, direct dialogue can take place, and in which specialisation and elitism can be reduced: for, while many free players are intensely dedicated musicians with rigorous practice regimes, free improvisation is nonetheless an activity open to anyone. This may break down the traditional barriers between a passive, non-specialist audience and a separated, elevated performer (think the People Band handing out percussion instruments at gigs, or even Roland Kirk's distribution of whistles to the audience at Ronnie Scott's).

Free improvisation, in Prévost's argument, is also made to steer a course between the other major avant-garde alternatives in twentieth-century (classical) music. The first of these is the rigorously scientific approach of the Darmstadt School, wherein results fairly similar to those which could be achieved in free improvisation were solely the province of the composer, conceived as a specialist with utterly rigorous and time-consuming methods. But, as Prévost points out with regard to

² <http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Hauntology>

Stockhausen's 'Mikrofonie I' (a detailed exploration of the myriad complex and unusual sonorities to be coaxed out of a tam-tam), such arguments frequently went against what actually happened in the realisation of these compositions as sound, as music, rather than as theoretical exercises on paper (scores): "Reading Karlheinz Stockhausen talking about the development of this 'composition' it becomes very clear that his own explorations with the tam-tam proved to be difficult to notate or even to repeat with any hope of accuracy. The question one has to ask is, why not let the musicians themselves make these sonic enquiries?, Why do Stockhausen's supporters maintain the idea that unpredictable sounds emerging this way, i.e. by the performers, constitute his 'composition'? As a long-standing tam-tam player myself, I know and rejoice in the uncertainties of the instrument. I am always amazed that different people using the same kind of instrument seem to manage to produce such a diversity of sounds. All this, to me, seems to be a signifier and a celebration of humanity and not at all scientific, even though a playful sense of enquiry is at the heart of the exercise. The interface between materials and the person has a special individual imprint. Such a free and spontaneous approach, which is the general *modus vivendi* of an improviser, is an unmediated and an unfettered response to the world. It is not, thankfully, subject to some scientific calculation. It is not repeatable. And there is no good reason why it should be repeated: except to capture and exclusively enslave the sounds – and maybe exploit them financially." (pp.54-5)

Perhaps the veneration of the composer has something to do with the cult of celebrity (tying back to the much older tradition of 'heroism' – and, of course, heroes are predominantly male, just as composers are), and of marketing opportunity. Thus, the infamous Helicopter Quartet, in which the musicians' performances in different helicopters are radioed back to the concert hall and mixed live by the composer, is an enormous spectacle, serving to propagate the myth of Stockhausen as a larger-than-life mystical genius, a composer whose works demand and involve an excess justified solely due to the part they play in the building up of this legend; an overpowering by scale and (apparent) audacity with the mystifying effect of a religious ritual, but without even the content of that ritual – truly, a Debordian spectacle.

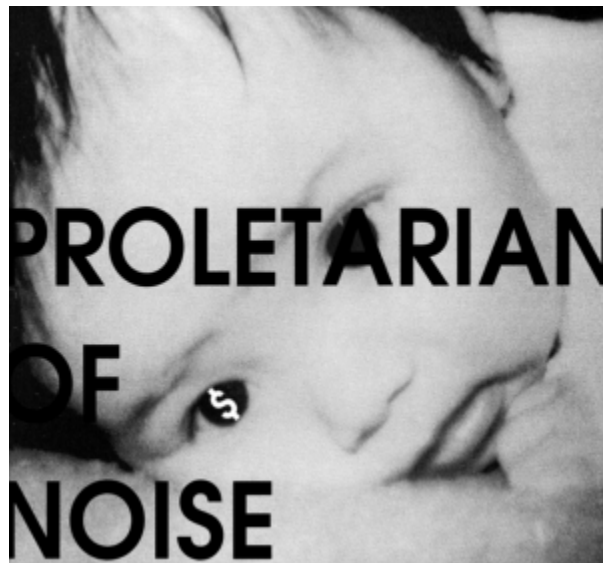
The second approach to come under Prévost's scrutiny is the apparently more affable Cageian school, here criticised for the removal of social relation and human intention from the process of music-making, the adoption of 'chance' and 'random' elements, the attempt to remove personality and to simply 'let the sounds be sounds'. The prime target here is Cage's long-term collaborator David Tudor – who was hauled up on precisely the same grounds by Cecil Taylor in A.B. Spellman's 'Four

Lives in the Bebop Business.’ Tudor once remarked: “I had to learn how to cancel my consciousness of any previous moment in order to produce the next one, bringing about the freedom to do anything.” The problem with this, as Prévost notes, is that “any so-called ‘freedom’ is totally dislocated from any human objective - except the perverse satisfaction of carrying out an irrelevant instruction. Perhaps Tudor, in the above quotation, was explaining some of his own strategies for trying to escape ‘the anticipated’ in performance. But there is something self-deceiving in the idea of trying: ‘to cancel one’s consciousness of any previous moment’. This practice is nigh impossible as well as being perhaps of no particular consequence.” (p.50) The freedom thus achieved is thus a very different one from that of free improvisation, which always carries with it some notion of *responsibility* (to oneself, to the audience, to the other musicians, to the flow of the music); it is a pointless freedom, a freedom which exists for no real purpose and to no real end, sacrificing both the self and the social to some idealized concept of nothingness.

This is all well argued, with a minimum of fuss and academic name or jargon-dropping, considering political theories and realities while remaining closely focussed on how these might and have related to actual practice, to actual music-making. But its presence in this anthology leaves a number of unanswered (or perhaps one might even say un-raised) questions: for instance, we might safely say that Prévost’s subject is acoustic free improvisation, given the reiteration of his dislike for “abuses occurring in music (e.g. the oppressive use of electronically induced volume and the indiscriminate, often careless and uninspired usurpation of material by means of sampling)” (p.57). Of course, ‘Noise’ *could* fit with Prévost’s ideal concepts of free improvisation if it is taken as a term signifying the opening up of spaces within and against the system of modern-day capitalism. Thus, in the following essay, by Ray Brassier: “ ‘Noise’ has become the expedient moniker for a motley array of sonic practices – academic, artistic, counter-cultural – with little in common besides their perceived recalcitrance with respect to the conventions governing classical and popular musics. ‘Noise’ not only designates the no-man’s-land between electro-acoustic investigation, free improvisation, avant-garde experiment, and sound art; more interestingly, it refers to anomalous zones of interference between genres: between post-punk and free jazz; between musique concrète and folk; between stochastic composition and art brut.” (p.62)

However, ‘Noise’ has also become – to quote Brassier once more – “a specific sub-genre of musical vanguardism,” a term which has come to designate precisely that loud, oppressive, harsh electronically-induced volume and playful/subversive use of sampling to challenge notions of genre and the origin of material, of which Prévost so disapproves. With

regards to this, issues arise such as the relation between loud electronics and quieter acoustic instruments, and, more broadly, the relation of free improvisation to noise (or free noise), and the role of theatre and performance in both (something I've come to feel increasingly neglected in the rather staid performance context of much free improv – of which more later). Mattin, for example, performs in both very quiet contexts with Radu Malfatti and extremely noisy and disrespectful contexts in which he constantly challenges expectations, in a quite aggressive way: for instance, 'Proletarian of Noise', which includes a half-hour track consisting of the reading of a text punctuated by extremely long silences, and a shorter piece consisting solely of the sounds of typing on a computer keyboard, and 'Pink Noise', where he lays down 30 minutes of ear-bending feed-back over which Junko simply screams – hardly a model of social (or socialist) interaction, as Prévost might desire.



I'll come back to such questions in a short while. But now, we might move on to look in more detail at some specific essays. Ben Watson – as usual – combines rabble-rousing quasi-manifesto gestures and sharp analysis of the lapses made by his various targets (in this case, *Wire* magazine, and their uncritical treatment of the whole 'Noise Music' scene), with the valorisation of a chosen few (Lendormin, Ascension, John Coltrane). In this particular piece, he also insists vociferously on a kind of cult of amateurism and the unlearning of technique which seems to me to ignore what actually goes on in the musics he so loves. I quote: "Modern art is an eruption of immediacy... rubbishing all previous cultural standards, achievements, techniques and skills: Asger Jorn's childish scribbles, Derek Bailey's 'can't play' guitar, J.H. Prynne's 'incomprehensible' poetry. Extrinsic formal structure (whether song or composition or training) prevents us seeing what's right under our noses: instruments, fingers, people, ears,

amplifiers, attention, inattention.” (pp.114-15) These are the things Watson values, as he’s made clear in his critical work throughout his career – and he’s entitled to such preferences. But, as he implicitly acknowledges by putting ‘can’t play’ in scare quotes, Bailey’s approach to the guitar was very different to what such a tag would suggest (see, for example, Dominic Lash’s description, available on the Incus website, of Bailey’s notes towards a planned, but never written book on guitar technique).³ Prynne, meanwhile, is ‘incomprehensible’ not because he’s a surrealist ranter or a primitivist sound-poet, but because of the sheer crammed range of intellection, reference, allusion and suggestion that bursts from virtually every word of his work. What Watson is doing here is taking accusations commonly leveled against ‘avant-garde’ artists, and then running with them as if they were true, and a good thing!

To take another example, his use of Coltrane as an exemplary figure for a raggedy collection of free jazzers, free improvisers, rock musicians and figures somewhere in between (such as the Italian group Lendormin) may in some ways be entirely accurate – but it does a disservice to Coltrane to implicitly construe him as some kind of primitive, unlearning technique for new pastures of uncharted freedom. For me, that’s a dangerously simplistic explanation – the same sort of thinking you get when rock critics name-check ‘Ornette Coleman’s free jazz playing’ and believe that this somehow ‘explains’ Don Van Vliet’s vastly different approach to the saxophone. OK then: contra Watson, Coltrane’s music is *not* an abdication of technique, but technique taken to the *n*th degree, in the service of expression and of noise (if we understand noise as overburdening of information density, as something we can’t yet understand, rather than just as regression to primitive yawling). Indeed, it’s far more helpful to construe any movement as generating its own techniques, its own formal codes and practices. This is just *simply unavoidable* – even if these codes do need sharp kicks up the backside every few years and even if something else may come along very soon. New codes are prompted into being through creative experimentation and the process of learning. That’s why a healthy respect for tradition by no means precludes an ability to play with, or even apparently to scorn it – as, in the eyes of its most rigidly conservative adherents, did Coltrane’s music. Such apparent scorn is actually a development of the original spirit in which it was first created. It’s precisely this attitude which has kept African-American forms of music so vital: as Archie Shepp puts it, “Negro music and culture are inherently existential, improvisational. Nothing is sacred.”

³ Dominic Lash, ‘Derek Bailey’s Guitar Notes: A Glimpse of the Incus Archive’, available at <http://www.incusrecords.force9.co.uk/pdf/Incus-DB-guitar-notes.pdf>

Watson's quite right to slam down the notion of rock bands who play noise "because Avant is in vogue", but his valorisation of aggression, of rock and roll energy and gesture, ignores the fact that the *opposite* of such Noise-as-Volume may be just as noisy as 'Noise' (volume and harshness on their own aren't inherently subversive; such a concept of noise is very much prone to the marketisation that Watson so despises). To illustrate this, we need turn no further than to the anecdote which prefaces the essay under discussion: that of Eugene Chadbourne playing country music to free improv audiences, who treated it as the kind of noise others would perceive free improv to be. I'm not, of course, suggesting that everyone should start playing country music to shake up the staid 'weird modern music' hierarchy, but what I am suggesting is that 'Noise' might be, at times, the opposite of what is normally considered 'noisy' – extremely quiet and apparently 'un-energetic' music may deny the visceral thrill of Noise (the thrill endorsed in Watson's emphasis on the physical), may deny that kind of macho aggression.⁴ Mattin, I think, realizes the dangers of a too-narrow definition of Noise, through his highly self-critical quest to avoid falling into set patterns (both behavioural and musical): his 'reductionist' work with Radu Malfatti is, according to this argument, just as 'noisy' as his more 'power-electronics' flavoured laptop work or the 'Pink Noise' collaboration with Japanese singer/screamer Junko.

I used the word 'macho' just now, and I'm not intending that to be merely a throwaway remark. If Noise, and a particular kind of 'visceral', 'energetic' form of sound-making does have a kind of macho thrust behind it, we might consider an alternative via the essay preceding Watson's, wherein Nina Power thoughtfully considers the work of female noise artist Jessica Rylan. For Power, Rylan's work challenges noise stereotypes, her performances engaging in a more elegant (though by no means twee) consideration of the relation between voice and synthesizer, human and machine, audience and artist. Indeed, gender is an issue which might profitably have been more discussed in this anthology as a whole: Power's (very good) essay feels like a token female inclusion, and is more an exploration of a particular artist's work than a wide-ranging survey of gendered noise – which is not in itself a problem, but which does mean that it can't bear the weight that's been forced on it, to fully fill the 'woman component' of the book. (That said, I'm sure Mattin would have been mindful of this and would have wanted to avoid the usual male-dominated circles in which so much of this music's production and reception seems to be conducted).

⁴ See also the concluding paragraph of Howard Slater's essay. "We can fear silence as if it were the most ear-splitting noise." (p.163)

So: why are so many of the artists mentioned men, playing at gigs attended by men? Is there perhaps something – dare I use the word? – *phallogentric* about noise, about the whole rock and roll myth of the singer with his phallic guitar or saxophone? They don't use the term 'cock rock' for nothing, and they might as well invent a similar term for less mainstream manifestations of 'aggression' and 'energy' in music. Of course, there are exceptions: the female performers in the heyday of No Wave (one of the few avant-garde musical movements in which women played a role equal to, and perhaps even more prominent than that of men), someone like Suzi Quatro, or Virginia Genta⁵ (the saxophonist in the Jooklo Duo) – but these are very much exceptions (see what a wide range of different musics I've had to traverse to compile even that miniscule list), and hence do not trouble the general balance of things. Thus, for instance, it's OK for Alice Coltrane to play 'harp-like' arpeggios on piano or even on an actual harp (because a harp is a rather womanly instrument and Alice Coltrane's music displays that 'feminine touch'), but it probably wouldn't be OK if *she* was the one doing calisthenics and blasting on saxophone for an hour at the front of the stage, rather than fitting into the background behind her husband.

We might well bear this gender imbalance in mind when we read Bruce Russell's optimistic statement that, "Being outside of the so-called 'music industry' which purveys alienated entertainment products that 'joyously express their slave sentiments', sound work can create, for brief periods of time 'constructed situations' where 'unitary ambiances' of sound, *mise en scène*, and selected audiences of initiated *enfants perdus* can briefly combine to 'foreshadow' 'a few aspects of a provisional micro-society.'" (p.89) The practitioners of Noise and Free Improv, for all their claims to be engaged in a field of activity which is inherently more self-critical than perhaps any other, seem to have a blind spot about still-ingrained gender imbalances and hierarchies, just as much Black Nationalism of the 1960s tarnished its emphasis on racial liberation with slurs on 'faggots', 'Jews' and women who did not fulfill the roles they were supposed to fulfil.

Even without considering gender, Matthew Hyland is able to take a less optimistic view than Russell, Prévost or Watson; in his words, "improvisation (as Derek Bailey intends it) resists commodification *almost successfully*. 'Almost' remains an upper limit as long as capital goes on being strengthened by what hasn't killed it yet." (p.130) Mathieu Saladin expands on this, pointing out that the very virtues which make free improvisation, to its more politically-motivated advocates like Prévost, a model form of interaction resistant to that of capitalist society, have been absorbed into the adapting forms of modern capitalism (what one might

⁵ <http://virginiagenta.altervista.org/>

call 'post-modern capitalism', I suppose). Thus (in the words of Pierre-Michel Menger, quoted by Saladin): "the irony is that the arts, which have cultivated a fierce opposition against the domination of the market, appear as forerunners in the experimentation with flexibility, indeed hyper-flexibility" (p.145). Or, Eve Chiapello: "Planning and rationality are not any more, according to the management teachers and consultants, the only ways to make a success. Conversely, it must be 'run by chaos,' continuously innovate, be flexible, intuitive, have a strong 'emotional quotient.' Companies are too bureaucratic, too hierarchical, they alienate the workforce; they have to 'learn how to dance.'" (p.146) This sounds none too dissimilar to free improvisation, to which one could easily apply a checklist derived from the description above: chaos, innovation, flexibility, intuition, emotion. In terms of concrete examples (or merely anecdotal 'verification'), this passage particularly struck me given that, when spinning out some paragraphs for a CV, I discovered how easy it was to spin aspects of my experience of freely improvising and organising a free improvising collective into 'work-place skills' that would enable me to slot nicely into a wholly capitalist job, to be a cog in the alienation machine.

Perhaps, in the end, one has to take this as a caveat rather than as a stumbling block which invalidates the whole free improv project; or, if not as a caveat, as the beginnings of an ongoing critical discussion and self-examination which will remain (as free improv itself remains) process rather than product, continued exploration rather than arrival or conclusion. Anthony Iles puts it best in the final sentence of his Introduction: "Since we cannot accept that noise or improvisation is by default anticapitalist music, then we need to look more closely at those resistances and tensions this music carries within itself – where it provides potential tools for capitalism and where it supplies means for getting out of it." (p.17) (For his part, Saladin concludes by arguing that, as process, free improvisation remains 'noisy' by its focus on dissensus rather than consensus – it is "a creation which does not seek reconciliation or the profit of any a priori success" (p.149)).

What the more idealistically-tinged essays in this collection tend to do is, via citing a whole range of Marxist scholars, to uphold the unique possibilities in free improvisation. Yet, while asserting that it may not be a perfectly resistant alternative to capitalism, they do not really delve into the specifics of sound practice – the production and consumption contexts of the free improv 'scene'. For instance, Bruce Russell argues that, "As a developing practice, and because of its improvisational method, this sound work is inherently self-critical. It is this which ensures its sharpness as a tool for exposing reification in other forms of

culture.” (p.77) I’d agree that the methods which one has developed and which one might be expected to espouse – especially if one has become associated with them in the minds and words of critics and audiences – may need to be rejected, questioned, criticised, so that they do not simply harden into marketable, reified activities, separable from the very human process of their making (though of course the risk of that happening is always far less great than in other forms of making music/sound). Yet the list of methods and possibilities which Russell comes up with hardly sounds very different to the sort of thing that might have been written when the music was in its infancy in the 1960s – it’s generalisable enough to resist further scrutiny: “experimentation with alternative performance-experiences, and the radical rejection of the cult of the composer, the ‘rules’ of music and the hierarchical models of composition, score-reading and conduction.” (p.87)

Yet, in practice, “experimentation with alternative performance-experiences” tends to mean an ‘underground’ network of spaces which, while they are certainly different to the concert hall, the rock arena, or the nightclub, have perhaps become environments which are too settled, too safe, too comfortable: middle-aged men with beards gathering in the back-rooms of pubs suffused with the smell of real ale and the sound of free improvisation (or, younger, long-haired, angry men gathering in dingy basement rooms suffused with the sound of feedback and the sight of flaring light shows erupting out of the darkness). The overtly theatrical and playful aspects brought into the music by Steve Beresford, Han Bennink, Tristan Hontsinger and Misha Mengelberg have always been rather disapproved of by a number of free improv aficionados, as if these performers had somehow over-stepped invisible rules, invisible guidelines which govern how you ‘should do’ free improv. By contrast, Derek Bailey would simply sit down, no-nonsense, and play, just as Merzbow, Sachiko M and Axel Dorner adopt a certain bodily stillness in their performances (though, of course, there are exceptions: Thomas Lehn’s very physical approach to his analogue synthesizer, Cecil Taylor’s pelvis-oriented movement on the piano stool). Conventional rules are very easy to fall into – people mill around, then the performers go up on stage and perform, then everyone claps and has a drink and mills around again – and challenges to this are particular notable, when they happen, because of their rarity; thus, Mattin’s in-concert behaviour has gained him the reputation of an *enfant terrible* and, frankly, a bit of a nuisance, when, if we are to believe Russell, such behaviour should be the norm in free improvisation.

And, while “alternative performance-experiences” might be a goal desirable but rarely strived for in actuality, Russell’s other criteria seem, frankly, a little old-hat: the usual sweeping dismissals of the entire

system of composition and the score is a hoary old chestnut if ever there was one. On these grounds, I suppose Russell would dismiss as ‘not free enough’, or as ‘not posing a challenge to reified practice’, most of the music of Anthony Braxton and Cecil Taylor (whose music is, as many of his collaborators have stressed, and as is obvious if you’ve listened to enough recordings, based very much around compositional material). In any case, I won’t go into the issue in detail here; suffice to say that I agree with Dominic Lash’s assertion that “free improvisation and the writing down of notes on paper are not mutually exclusive activities.”⁶

Russell might usefully have paid more attention to the final essay in the collection, Mattin’s piece on the way that Noise and Improvisation could/ should resist the notion of Intellectual Property. Developing Cardew’s famous assertion of the inadequacy of recordings in ‘Towards an Ethics of Free Improvisation’, Mattin delves into the way in which such ideological statements so frequently contradict the way in which free improvisation is actually distributed: Incus, Emanem, and Matchless all being established record labels devoted to selling recordings of in-the-moment, one-off performances, as reproducible and repeatable artefacts. For all the claims to abandonment of ‘go-getter’ individualism and the cult of the ‘inspired’ genius, free improvisers nonetheless continually reinforce certain notions of authorship, of a hierarchy of performer and audience, in which certain people create and certain people consume (though, to be fair, the proportion of actual free improvisers among the listening cachet for free improv records must be fairly high). Of course, this is by no means conscious: hence Eddie Prévost’s astonishment that anyone could want to make a ‘career’ out of free improv (p.146). In addition, it often arises out of a material necessity: the struggle to actually earn enough money to make even a rather poorly-paid living from being a free-improvising musician. When it comes to the choice between actively resisting existing notions of authorship and putting bread on the table, there are few who would take the option of starvation.

In relation to this, we might consider the concluding point of Matthew Hyland’s essay: that the dedicated part-timer may have more time and commitment to spend on thinking deeply about their music than the professional in the pay of record companies or reliant on state funding. This is a more nuanced addition to Ben Watson’s championing of the amateur – the professionalisation and individualisation and specialisation resulting from the pragmatics of ‘making a living’ may be inherently un-noisy, however much the ensuing product is ‘difficult’ art which pushes up the decibels.

⁶ Lash, *ibid.*

I'm not – necessarily – arguing that all free improvisers and noise-makers should be amateurs, spending their days washing dishes or driving taxis (as Cecil Taylor and McCoy Tyner did), and their nights creating sound. In itself that relegates improvisation to a subordinate role, a secret and illicit activity which one does 'after-hours', part of one's 'leisure-time', a 'hobby' rather than a main activity. It also runs the risk of valorising poverty, thus neatly dovetailing with the notion of the starving, misunderstood artist (Chatterton dead in his garret, Van Gogh crazed and earless, Sonny Simmons and Charles Gayle living on the streets). According to that viewpoint, the more crummy the job, the better – you are suffering for what you believe in, you are a martyr at the hands of an unjust system, you can view yourself and be viewed as a hero.

These are dangers. But that does not mean we should ignore the way in which the much-cited 'DIY ethos' characterising free improv and noise scenes has become an easy accolade, a back-slapping means of ignoring the way in which performing practices can slip into established patterns, or even into cliques and hierarchies. Despite this, DIY does still remain important, and Mattin is right to point out the way in which it could, if pursued to a sufficiently rigorous and self-critical extent, challenge notions of authorship and intellectual property/control.⁷ This is part of a wider discourse – the work of Michel Foucault, and, especially, Roland Barthes, tends to be applied more to literature than to music, but is particularly illuminating in this context due to the way it challenges what can easily seem the accepted and 'natural' way of things ('I create my music as an individual, it is my intellectual property, and I have a right to this ownership'), the way it reveals how the actual production and distribution of ideas is always a social phenomenon. "Once written, the author stops having control over the text. The text has its own discourse and power and we should not limit it to an authoritarian voice. Language itself has its own potential and to make it solely the property of the author might dilute its power." (p.179)⁸ That's not to say that musicians are not *responsible* for what they play, and for 'putting it out' (whether in the form of public performances or records), but is to say that the freedom involved in creating the music could and should be extended to the way that music is received.

⁷ "People have been self-organising themselves by organising concerts wherever possible and more. This self-organisation, which constantly makes people change roles; from player to organiser, from critic, to distributor, helps people understand each others roles... Both in the improvised and noise scene the question of authorship is completely interrelated to that of the producer." (p.173)

⁸ Consider alongside this: "What unfolds and becomes visible in the works, the source of their authority, is none other than the truth manifested objectively in them, the truth that consumes the subjective intention and leaves it behind as irrelevant." (Theodor Adorno (trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson), 'Parataxis: on Holderlin's late Poetry', in Notes to Literature, Vol. 2 (New York; Columbia Univ. Press, 1992), p.110)

Idealism? Perhaps there is a touch, but at least Mattin can succeed in getting people to think about the fundamental, basic contexts of what they do, rather than simply re-iterating the statements of the '60s. It's not enough simply to state that free improv and Noise are resistant to capitalism, and then to treat this as a given, without questioning this relation, without using one's assertions as a basis to develop and change one's own practices. Thus, if Eddie Prévost argues that "certain material conditions have to be met before any music can be made," Mattin takes things further: "the radical and exploratory character of improvisation should be directed not only to the making of music but in changing the conditions in which the music is produced." (p.191) And perhaps – dare we hope? – changing conditions on this 'micro' level might provide the conditions of possibility for change on a wider scale. **(DG)**

Noise & Capitalism

Publisher

Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia-Arteleku

General Councilor

Markel Olano Arrese

Council of Department of Culture and Basque

Maria Jesús Aranburu

Director of Cultural Promotion and Diffusion

Haritz Solupe Urresti

Head of Visual Arts Service-Arteleku

Ana Salaverria Monfort

General Coordinator of Arteleku

Kepa Landa Maritorena

Coordinator of Audiolab Arteleku

Xabier Erkizia

Editors

Mattin, Anthony Iles

Cover design and concept

Emma Hedditch, Sara Kaaman, Mattin

Designer

Xavier Balderas

Acknowledgments

Ben Watson (for title suggestion), Lisa Rosendahl, Maider Zilbeti, Natalia Barberia, Ertz festival, Santi Eraso, Miren Eraso, Terre Thaemlitz, Nick Smith, Noè Cornago, Jean-Luc Guionnet, Ulrike Mueller and Mute Magazine

Printing

Leitzaran Grafikak

Legal deposit

SS-1085-2009

ISBN 978-84-7907-622-1

GIG REVIEWS

GANNETS + PHIL WASCHMANN/ CHRIS STUBBS

Folly Bridge Inn, Oxford, Tuesday 29th September 2009

"one of the highlights of the London Jazz Festival"

TIME OUT

"the abstract improv' version of the Guillemots"

John Fordham **THE GUARDIAN**



. Fyfe Dangerfield . Alex Ward . Chris Cundy

. Dominic Lash . Steve Noble .

www.myspace.com/gannets



The duo of Phil Wachsmann (violin, with electronics) and Chris Stubbs (percussion, also with electronics) took a while to hit its stride (though stride isn't really the appropriate metaphor, given the particular logic of incident which was in play). Wachsmann bowed violin lines in 'modern classical' vein, often repeating one note with bowing variations, playing rather piquant, attractive melodies, then scraping the bow below the bridge or dissonantly plucking: a succession of sound techniques in which *flow* wasn't quite adjusted, as yet. That said, what the set revealed as it went on was that flow was often not the order of the game; incidents followed one another in blocks rather than lines, though single areas would frequently be examined at length, especially by Wachsmann.

Things were settling in by the time the first piece reached its latter stages, and Stubbs' percussion in particular was really coming into its own. Rather than a 'kit', he utilised a 'junk' set-up: tubs, household implements, and a sheet of metal with stones and coils attached, connected to a small amp and an electronic device which was hidden away behind the upside-down box on which the metal had been placed. His playing was busy, clanging, clattery: a delectable kitchen-pan style approach sure to break things up and keep them moving, though the amplified metal elicited more drawn-out variations, arising no doubt from a delight in the sonorities which were being lovingly drawn from the scrape of a knife or the rattle of a stone.

Wachsmann took a closing violin solo (something that he had been building towards for a while, it seemed), and after brief applause, it was Stubbs who went solo, to his surprise as much as anyone else's – it just felt right, and Wachsmann, eyes closed as ever, concentrated hard, soaking it all up and waiting for the right moment to enter. It came, and soon, with the aid of pedals and resultant effects, he was creating the effect of an entire string section, without this sounding gimmicky – in fact, it was texturally quite delightful, thick and crumbly but with a tautness to it that seemed as though it could break at any point. He even got into some Henry Flynt/ Tony Conrad-style folk-tinged melodic drone, in a section lasting minutes which was really quite pretty, almost pastoral, until Stubbs' stormclouds of foghorn electronics pushed him into engine effects, bowing up and down the string, and thence to texturally sparser but more actively eventful extrapolations.

Gannets played LOUD from the off, and didn't stop: the sheer force of their entry took me by surprise, as Steve Noble's drums and Fyfe Dangerfield's massively amped-up and distorted keyboard vibrated the floor. It's impossible really to describe the whole performance (which I guess must have lasted around forty minutes) step by step: though there were definite narrative segments, the overwhelming power and loudness

made it hard to remember what had gone before. Paying attention to particular lines or areas or segments would be like concentrating on the individual bricks which made up this monstrous wall of sound. I say 'wall of sound', but, on reflection, that well-travelled metaphor seems inappropriate given the relentless *propulsion* of the thing. This was not a solid construction that sat still on solid foundations; rather something had somehow been set in motion that just would not stop. Indeed, it was almost as if the music had moved beyond the conscious control of the players. I don't mean that they weren't in control of what they were playing, but that what and when they chose to play (mostly, sounds full of timbral harshness and buoyant, abrasive energy, all the time) were decisions into which they were pushed by force of circumstance, being made to think and to act simultaneously, to play something before they'd caught up with what was involved. It's an approach which, of necessity, skimps on detail, or seems to do so, though the make-up of this sound mass is clearly very complex (anyone attempting to analyse the minutiae of what was going on would find enough material to keep them occupied in a research hole for months).

When things threatened to quieten or turn more melodic, one player would be sure to squall or bang or pluck away and up the ante once more, compensating for any drop in volume and tempo. Thus, a slamming riff section or a burst of 'fake jazz' from Dangerfield's suddenly tinny keyboard would soon be dropped for more collective lung-busting, even if Noble did often keep up a fairly pronounced beat, as well as making his customary journeys round his kit with sticks and with various percussive accessories.

Despite the emphasis played on the band as a *band* rather than as a grouping of showy individuals, each musician's approach had something distinctively out-standing about it. Dominic Lash's amplified bass, even with one broken string, gave a real deep end to the band's sound. Alex Ward's shards of altissimo wail on saxophone and clarinet were Marshall Allen-like in their scrawly magnificence, and his melodic leaps, as ever, were endlessly fascinating in their absurdly quick-thinking, mellifluous flow. And Chris Cundy played a mean free jazz bass clarinet, alternating low honks, growls and parps with high yawps and cries, and leaping up the registers even more with piercing soprano sax – though his playing on that instrument was often more melodic, if you were able to pick it out of the collective ferment.

At times one wished not so much for 'subtlety' (what's the point in imposing criteria on the music which it was manifestly not attempting to, and not going to fulfill?) as for a slight reduction of volume in Dangerfield's corner. The utter loudness of his set-up could be seen to

have hindered a more dialogic approach between the other musicians which would have produced some textural variety: but then again, the turbo boost of his floor-shaking rumbles and police siren whooshes isn't something you come across in every improv band. As a whole, the group displayed a nicely collective and layered approach to noise-making: with no 'leader' and no 'solos', anyone could shape the music's direction, though that seemed to generate itself much of the time, as an unstoppable current against which the musicians had to swim with ever more frantically powerful strokes. For a good forty minutes, then, Gannets transformed the function room of the Folly Bridge Inn into a profane temple of unholy textured noise. **(DG)**

SUNN O))) + BJ NILSEN

Trinity, Bristol, Wednesday 9th December 2009

45 minutes of crunching electronics with no one on stage; stacks of amps, keyboards and guitars an eerie presence, illuminated with colour lights but unmanned, occasional puffs from a smoke machine reinforcing the impression of machines somehow making their own sounds, unaided, unprompted. Echoes of FX – thunder gunshot voice elements; field recordings rendered as noise, with something of a low end (there were certainly vibrations through the floor) but, compared to the show which followed, more of an emphasis on extreme high pitches. Turns out that all this sound was coming from the laptop of support artist BJ Nilsen, at the back of the room, but with everyone crowded up to the front of the stage, craning their necks to see the main draw appear, it seemed instead like an extra-long 'opening theme' for the band to come out to – particularly as various hooded figures would occasionally wander out armed with a torch and a bottle of wine, stumble around, and then potter back off stage. A nice way to play with the usual conventions of support/main act relations – everyone was here for Sunn, so to stick the laptop guy in the shade, as it were, stretched the usual notions of anticipation/ tension/ expectation to breaking point, forming a comment on stage craft and performance aesthetics as well (a sort of satirical minimalism, in preparation for the tongue-in-cheek/deadly serious metal theatrics to follow).

When the mad monks finally did emerge, their down-tuned guitar feedback drone meshed with Nilsen's electronics for a few minutes, before eventually overpowering them. Things were a little sluggish to start off with – as, of course, is the way with such music, but, though the volume certainly was there, the *heaviness* hadn't quite set in, the total immersion in inexorable alternations of sound-masses (chords), in riffs rendered almost static by their slowness (but, in context, felt as relatively fast-paced dances, folk stomps, lumbering peasant celebrations). O'Malley and Anderson concentrated mainly on two chords, not clear

enough to be called riffs, rendered muddy and thick by the addition of Steve Moore's heavily processed Korg keyboards. This went for fifteen minutes or so before Attila Csihar emerged, carrying what initially appeared to be a shadowed idol, but soon turned out to be a see-through plastic head, which he proffered to each of the other band members in turn before launching into a whispered/spoken vocal which was, no doubt, a tale of dark deeds and pagan ritual (the words were pretty much inaudible in the thicket of sound; Attila's voice was clear enough, but more as instrumental colour than anything else). Something was still missing, however; but, as the guitars dropped out, some much-needed space crept into the music, from where things could now build in a more purposeful fashion. Attila took centre-stage, alternating the swirling phaser-effects of his throat singing with death metal screams, an effect mirrored by the held drone tones and squawking flurries of Moore's trombone (the only time he used the instrument through the whole set). Space builds tension, repetition and alternation builds ritual power; the guitars come back in and it gets heavy. Cassocked, Attila cradles the microphone, shadows his face, so that the sounds seem to emerge from the depths of his hood rather than from any human mouth. After some time, he disappears, O' Malley and Anderson slugging it out regardless.

It's a while before he comes back on stage, having done a costume change; his robes are now covered in what look like a kid's attempt to make a suite of armour, his face draped in a horror-movie mask (what looks, through the smoke and the coloured lights, like melted white glue). He's still carrying the plastic head, but now has an additional accessory- a statue of liberty style crown, which he first places on the 'idol,' before putting it on his own head and flashing laser-beams, which emerge from a pair of gloves, at the audience. I suppose that's all by the by, although he does insist on playing around with the laser beams for the rest of the set. Sunn's stage-craft always flirts with the ridiculous, but at this point it seemed that all caution had been abandoned and a full-blown relationship was being initiated. In any case, Attila's vocals were now an indistinguishable mixture of Satanic reverses, Gregorian chant, and Eastern-European folksong; hard to get a handle on, but made easier by a guitar slugging into a riff, the guitarist lumbering from side to side in a bizarre shuffle that, though maybe too slow to be called a dance, certainly approached something of the sort. In perhaps one of the only genuine headbanging moments of the night (albeit in slo-mo), the riff came in and out of a feedback wall, which occasionally dipped as the vocal folksong took a sinister turn over Moore's distorted, bell-like Fender Rhodes. Things built in this manner to an almighty climax, Attila obsessively shining his lasers into the crowd before eventually giving up and slowly collapsing onto the floor as O'Malley and Csihar waved their guitars like giant axes in front of the amp-stacks. And then everyone went off into the night with their ears ringing & a headache. The end. (DG)



List of Contributors

Sean Bonney, a poet, co-runs the press Yt Communication with Frances Kruk. His published work includes 'Notes on Heresev', 'Baudelaire in English', and 'Blade Pitch Control Unit.' More writing can be found at his blog:

<http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com>

David Grundy, the editor of this magazine, is a recent graduate of Cambridge University. He is involved in free improvisation in Bristol, Cheltenham, Oxford and Cambridge.

Alexander Kindness is a member of I-C-E (the Improvising Clarinet Ensemble) and the trio Kindness/ May/ Lash (with percussionist Paul May and bassist Dominic Lash).

Daniel Larwood, a Cambridge University Graduate, is a member of The Cambridge Free Improvisation Society.

Maggie Nicols has been an active free-improvising vocalist, dancer, and performer since the late 1960s. Her numerous groups and collaborations include the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Keith Tippett's Centipede, the Feminist Improvising Group, and the trio Les Diaboliques, with pianist Irene Schweizer and bassist Joëlle Léandre.

Ian Thumwood, a keen football fan, birdwatcher and amateur pianist, has an extensive knowledge of the history and practice of jazz.

Seth Watter has written on music and film for Dusted, WFMU, and Paracinema.